play

Ghost in the Shell
Stand Alone Complex

...found a voice...a stunning new **PS2** game, **TV series** and ...eature film...and we have all three!

Interview	Hands-on	Anime
Jak 3	**Lord of the Rings**	**Lady Death**
The final epic in the Jak & Daxter trilogy is a total stunner!	EA's Third Age goes where no American RPG has gone before	Hell hath no fury like Lucifer's daughter scorned

Behind the Arsenal: Ratchet & Clank Ohshima on Blinx 2 **Tak is back!** Fullmetal Alchemist **Shadow Hearts 2** `INSIDE`

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ook for that contract extension.

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There is nothing I can't do
No truth I can't find
No evil I can't stop

I must be a "dude"

There's a scourge in the land that needs immediate eradication. If ever the video game collective needed to unite to squash a prospective calamity, now is that time. It's called The Guy Game, and it's headed for a video game console near you. It's not enough that misguided young ladies doing unspeakable things clog our inboxes, the internet, and pollute late-night TV with infomercial slut-a-thons; the first step towards turning game consoles into interactive beat-off boxes is now at hand. To think that the consoles we experience works of art on from the likes of Square, Konami, Capcom, Microsoft, Nintendo and Sega could be used to coax spring break coeds to strip naked saddens me to no end. And to think that we got upset when games became too mainstream. After 14 years in this industry, to see it come to this in the name of the almighty dollar is just sad. In case you're still not feeling me, here's the verbatim description of The Guy Game from their website: "The Guy Game puts you in the world's wildest party spot for the steamiest Spring Break action ever! Shot live at South Padre Island, this Red-Hot Trivia Challenge lets you play with over 60 smokin' coeds during Spring Break Insanity, as they proudly show off their 'assets' for your personal enjoyment. You bring the party and we'll supply the game – YOU'LL SCORE EVERY TIME!"

What "guys" would get *together* to "play" this? Wouldn't that be like group admission that you're complete losers? Like I need a "guy" with a controller and a boner sitting next to me. Imagine, if you will, this game selling well (and you know it will) and the repercussions it could have. How is a legitimate studio with an original IP supposed to get funded millions of dollars, when publishers discover they can hit pay dirt with a tiny budget, a group of "hotties" and few 12-packs? Not that gaming as we know it would cease to exist, but I know how publishers think, and they will cash in. Investors and banks only speak one language: money. I'm not even saying there's anything wrong with smut, but isn't the internet, cable TV and DVD enough real estate for them to do their thing? Do we need this type of content on video game hardware? I feel betrayed that Sony and Microsoft would let this seep into our midst in the first place. Sony won't approve a cool 3D Goemon or assorted 2D, but live stripping is okay? I'm shocked that a Japanese company would stand for this, especially one as socially significant as Sony.

There are those that will shout double standard, offering the argument that if rampant video game violence is okay what's wrong with showing the human body, but this isn't the tasteful nudity that we hoped might one day grace in-game cinematics in line with R-rated films; this is trash, smut…the kind of stuff you look away from; the kind of crap that will haunt these misguided women—unless they go into porn or stripping—for the rest of their lives. The "violent" game equivalent would be a light-gun game where you explode static, realistic human heads at point-blank range, chipping away until brains coated the screen. This doesn't come anywhere near art, and art is what gaming is all about. If this is where gaming getting "big" has gotten us, then I fear what the future has in store. I'm glad there is no Sega hardware around to see this, and commend Nintendo for not participating. Talk about food for thought.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

> "The 'violent' game equivalent would be a light-gun game where you explode static, realistic human heads at point-blank range…"

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ALIVE
ATE

Heaven on earth is here with the first 3D online fighting game to date, Dead or Alive Ultimate. Experience the first "Virtual Arcade" with a double disk pack featuring the original DOA and a totally redesigned DOA2, creating a whole new world in online fighting games. DOA2, built from the ground up on a brand new engine, features new interactive worlds, never-before seen costumes, mind-blowing graphics, earth-shattering new moves, and exclusive new cut scenes that reveal secrets from the past. Plus, special bonus content contains a behind the scenes peek at the making of DOAU and the developers behind the series, the DOA3 Booster Disc, collectable trading cards and more!

DEAD OR ALIVE
ULTIMATE

contents

022

2D Fighters don't change until the **King** decrees it so.

MAXIMUM IMPACT
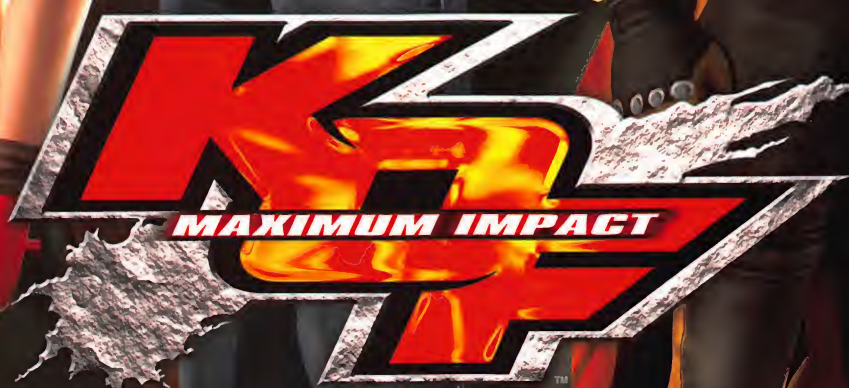
The synthesis of breathtaking **3D** animation with the heart and soul of a **2D** classic is now complete.

14 CLASSIC FIGHTERS   5 NEW WARRIORS   LIGHTNING QUICK COMBOS

playback

BloodRayne 2

Review review

I've been noticing a trend in gaming forums lately. Not that it hasn't always been an issue of some discord, but I find that it's gotten worse over time. Game reviews, be it in publications or web sites and the validity of their accuracy, are fast becoming brawl inducing catalysts. I find more threads on review arguments than I do critiques of the games themselves. Which brings me to my topic. Who should review games? I honestly think that a publication or web site should take a few things into account before they hand off a final disc to "X" employee for review. First and foremost, does the person have any interest or enthusiasm about the genre they are reviewing? Take me for example. If someone was to give me a copy of Madden 2005 and ask for a write up about it I can pretty much guarantee that the game will receive low marks across the board even if the game is amazing. Why? Cause I have zero interest in sports titles. I don't play 'em and I sure as hell don't like 'em. The same thing applies to anyone else who would review a game. Is it a subject or genre that interests the reviewer? It's damn important that it is because if the answer is no then your review simply will not be true to the product. Second, has the reviewer been privy to play time on the product at various early stages of production? If the answer is yes then I think they should honestly not be allowed to review said product. The mentality to that could possibly create an over-appreciation of the product too early and you could get almost the opposite effect of too much love of the product which could sway a score the other way. I know this in practice would be difficult. However I think it is possible that the reviewer could be picked early on so that they would know not to spend too much time with the product before the game comes to completion so it could be properly played through. I believe you'd end up with more of a fresh and true perspective on the title. I see time and time again reviews for games from people who obviously don't have an appreciation for what they are reviewing or simply don't really know anything at all about games. The result is a scarring score which sheds just a bit more negativity on a product that could possibly have been a true labor of love by a large group of designers for several years. That's just not fair to them and it's just not fair to the fans who have been looking forward to the product.

Rock on PLAY! -SiRRiS-

If only as much thought went into most game reviews as did your letter. The sad fact is that too often, games are treated as targets, reviewed by the wrong people for the wrong reasons. Even worse is that it's the publishers', PR people's and even to some extent the developers' faults. The only bastion of the entertainment industry is reaping what it sows.

Blue Blue Skies he sees

This news here is amazing! I read the headlines, and I still can't believe it. It's like the most unlikely extra I'd have ever thought they'd do for Outrun 2, a real DREAM. I heard the extra courses will be remakes from the original Outrun. This is just too good to be true.

SW

That and more lie in wait... We can't say what, but if you're into Sega racers (and something tells me you are), you'll be very happy. Too bad Microsoft is making us hold our tongues.

Galleon galleys

Just brought home the brand new issue (Sept.) and noticed there was no review of Galleon. So, I was wondering, do you not have plans to print a review, or did you guys just

> " I find more threads on review arguments than I do critiques of the games themselves."

not get a reviewable copy in time for this issue. If you aren't going to print a review, would you mind replying with your personal score, please? I just can't trust most other media sources for an accurate review anymore...

j

Dear Play,
The further I get in Galleon the more peeved I become. I went out and bought the game based on your preview, and I must say, it's a fantastic game, especially for anyone who liked the early Tomb Raiders. Why is it then that everywhere I look the game seems to be getting slammed? And not only that but they're uninformed. From how long it took to make to why it looks the way it does (which I quite like) they all seem to be pretty much guessing. Is Atlus doing anything about this?

Boca 1

We got a more than a few of these gems on Galleon reviews. The reason we couldn't review it is because Atlus promised the review to someone else exclusively (in exchange for what, we don't know) so we had to hold our review even though we had it ready to go; gotta love

those embargoes. According to Atlus, it may be their last, so hurray for them. As far as the reviews go, well, this is a perfect example of what we were talking about earlier—the wrong people reviewing the wrong games for the wrong reason. Check our review this issue.

As seen on TV

I was just watching some weirdness on G4/Tech TV and was wondering what your guys' take is so far on the whole game TV network thing. Is it just me or does it seem like they have to stretch to fill air space? I was also wondering if G4 is in LA why they don't have a Play show or something? You guys know your s**t. I've only seen you guys on there once or twice. Just curious.

D. Gum

Funny you should mention that. We had a few meetings at G4 about a Play spot early on. But it was the old "if we do a Play show then we have to do a this show and a that show"...so nothing ever came of it. For the record, we like G4. The fluff is necessary. No way to fill that much space with wall-to-wall compelling shows. The way the industry moves, it's not built for it. It's great they've managed to find so many cool female hosts too. We hope to see a lot more female gamers in the future for obvious reasons.

The Red Star's flag at half-mast

I just found out Acclaim is bankrupt, all the employees have been let go, and they're shutting their doors for good! But what about The Red Star? You've got to tell me, has it been picked up, is the Austin studio defunct as well, WILL I EVER GET TO PLAY THIS AWESOME GAME? Only you could know how I feel. This game has been at the top of my list for months. I even had it preordered. Is there light at the end of this dark tunnel? I expect a full report in the next issue of Play. Until then, I'll keep my fingers crossed, and hope for a miracle.

Cale

It is an awesome game, and an awesome team. They were so pumped to get gamers' reactions. This is a real blow. Not sure what will become of the studio, but we'll most assuredly see The Red Star very soon. Games this good don't float around for long unless they have massive price tags, which isn't the case here. We went ahead with our review to keep things moving. If it's delayed more than a few months, we'll visit it again when the time is right. Hang in there. There are 25 levels worth waiting for.

ink

Croft and creator reunited!

Gaming legends don't die...they only change developers

Great news to report on the Tomb Raider front: Toby Gard, the original mind behind Lara Croft's adventures, has joined Crystal Dynamics as one of the senior designers on the new Tomb Raider team! Gard will complement the existing team of Crystal's best, chiseling away on the next evolution of Lara. It will be interesting to see what the pairing balance the old

Gard/Core design and Crystal brings to the table. Will Lara retain her clunky controls? Or will she be given new, more nimble commands? All Eidos will say is that "the Tomb Raider team is drawing upon a great deal of research, consumer and editorial feedback and game development talent to build a title they'll be proud of...and one you'll want to play." We believe!

Toby Gard and Lara reunited!? This is better than a Spice Girls reunion! She was his first, after all...

Nintendo goes retro yet again

Just when I thought I'd get through an issue without a story about NES games being resurrected on the Game Boy Advance, Nintendo has announced a second round of Classic NES Series titles coming to the U.S. on October 25. The games riding the retro wave this time out are Dr. Mario, Zelda II: The Adventure of Link, Castlevania and the rather redundant Metroid (kind of unnecessary considering it's incorporated into Metroid: Zero Mission and Metroid Prime). Hey, no Kid Icarus!? For shame. There has also been talk within Nintendo of America of bringing out other classic NES games that haven't hit the Japanese GBA yet, such as Baseball Stars, Tecmo Bowl and Contra, but there's nothing concrete at this point.

The end of an era for Acclaim

Veteran publisher files for bankruptcy

Even as the company was on the cusp of releasing its most exciting game in years, Acclaim Entertainment has been forced to file for bankruptcy, closing the doors on the publisher responsible for classics such as Wizards & Warriors, Turok: Dinosaur Hunter, the early WWF titles and the home version of the original Mortal Kombat. After suffering an initiation of de-listing procedures from NASDAQ, getting its line of credit terminated by its primary lender (GMAC Commercial Finance LLC) and failing to find a new source of financing, Acclaim filed for bankruptcy in late August. Days prior to the bankruptcy filing, Acclaim shut down all operations at its three main offices—in Glen Cove, NY, Austin, TX and Manchester, UK—and laid off the vast majority of its employees. When contacted by phone, Edward Slezak, Acclaim's vice president and corporate counsel, only said, "I'm not going to talk to any reporters, thanks," before hanging up.

According to two employees, Glen Cove staffers were told to meet in the company cafeteria at noon Friday, August 27, where Acclaim chief financial officer Gerard Agoglia told the 50 or so people that, because negotiations for the new loan agreement had failed, it was filing for bankruptcy protection. Employees would not be paid for their last two weeks of work, they would not receive payment for unused vacation time and their benefits would end the following Tuesday. They were also told to clean out their offices and work spaces immediately and to leave the building, said employees, one of whom declined to give her name. None of the company's other upper management, including co-chairmen and co-founders Gregory Fischbach and James Scoroposki and chief executive Rodney Cousens, were in attendance, the employees said.

David Kaplan, 24, who had worked at Acclaim for two years as a game tester, was off during the meeting and heard about the closure from a co-worker, and said that no one else from the company called to tell him. However, rumors of impending bankruptcy had circulated for weeks, he said, and Thursday night people were seen cleaning out their desks "because they didn't know if they would have a job the next day."

"Nobody was really surprised that it happened," said Kaplan, of Dix Hills, who said he enjoyed his job with Acclaim.

As for Acclaim's completed games such as The Red Star and Juiced, they will likely be sold to another publisher.

ink

It's a bloody good cast!

Sir Ben Kinsley has joined the cast of the *BloodRayne* film, which began principal photography in Romania this past August. Best known for his roles in *Gandhi*, *Sexy Beast* and *House of Sand and Fog*, he'll undoubtedly make a great Kagan, King of the Vampires, BloodRayne's not-so-dear and very old dad. BloodRayne's heels will be filled by Terminator 3's Kristanna Loken, and, by her side, look for Michelle Rodriguez (*Resident Evil, Fast and the Furious, Girl Fight, SWAT*) as a vampire hunter. Michael Madsen (*Reservoir Dogs, Kill Bill*) has also signed on. Written by Guinevere Turner (*American Psycho*) and produced by Vancouver-based Brightlight Pictures—which recently co-produced *White Noise*, starring Michael Keaton, and line produced *Edison* for Millennium Films and Emmett/Furla Films, starring Kevin Spacey, Morgan Freeman, LL Cool J and Justin Timberlake—the production seems to be in good hands. Could this be director Uwe Boll's breakout film? Having amassed a war chest in the $47 million range, the stars certainly seem aligned.

Currently in Romania covered in fake blood are (L-R): Sir Ben Kingsley, Kristanna Loken, Michael Madsen and Michelle Rodriguez.

Japan gets a taste of MGS3

With the wait for the much-anticipated Metal Gear Solid 3 growing ever shorter, Konami has announced its Japanese-exclusive plans for a special edition of the game, as well as a pre-order bonus disc called Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater – The First Bite. The First Bite will contain six songs from the game's soundtrack, including both English and Japanese versions of the title song, Snake Eater, along with a music video clip, an exclusive MGS3 screen saver and bonus camo patterns usable within MGS3. The special edition, meanwhile, will contain an MGS3 DVD, two artwork booklets and a 1/144th scale model, although the exact details of these bonus items remain speculation as of press time. The special edition will sell for about $120. Unfortunately, Konami Digital Entertainment America currently has no plans for a U.S. release of these items.

News Bits

SNK recently revealed that a new Metal Slug game will be shown, among other titles, at the upcoming Tokyo Game Show. Most likely, this will be Metal Slug's venture into 3D... Sony is working on a sequel to their survival horror game Siren... Nintendo has slashed the price of the GBA SP to $79.99, likely in preparation for the DS' launch... At an event held in August, THQ officially confirmed that their WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw game will indeed offer online gameplay... Once believed canceled, Goemon for PS2 has reappeared on Working Designs' release schedule... Nintendo's Paper Mario 2 has been given a new official name: Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door... Capcom just won't stop; Mega Man Battle Network 5 is coming, even after a version 4.5 (featuring a device where players can actually plug battle chips into their GBA) has just hit Japan... Speaking of Capcom, Nightmare Before Christmas won't make its original Halloween release and will instead hit next spring. Devil May Cry 3 may show up around that time as well.

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Editor's GCM Choice

GAME CHRONICLES BEST OF E3 2004 NOMINEE

BEST OF SHOW 2004

database

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Star Wars Battlefront** lucasarts / ps2
02	**Half-Life 2** vu games / pc
03	**The Sims 2** ea / pc
04	**Def Jam: Fight for NY** ea / ps2
05	**Fable** microsoft / xb
06	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / xb
07	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005** ea / ps2
08	**Pikmin 2** nintendo / gc
09	**Doom 3** activision / pc
10	**Burnout 3** ea / ps2

NPD/TRSTS Top Ten July Game Sales

01	**NCAA Football 2005** ea / ps2
02	**ESPN NFL 2K5** sega/take 2 / ps2
03	**Spider-Man 2** activision / ps2
04	**ESPN NFL 2K5** sega/take 2 / xb
05	**NCAA Football 2005** ea / xb
06	**Spider-Man 2** activision / xb
07	**Spider-Man 2** activision / gba
08	**Spider-Man 2** activision / gc
09	**Driv3r** atari / ps2
10	**Tales of Symphonia** namco / gc

Your Megastore Beckons!

Star Wars Battlefront
lucasarts / ps2

LucasArts continues to raise the bar on Star Wars action games. This one does it all...and does it online.

Def Jam: Fight for NY
ea / ps2, xb, gc

What could be sicker than hip-hop music, you ask? Hip-hop brawling, that's what! This here is sick, yo!

Doom 3
activision / pc

God's gift to FPS (or maybe it's the Devil's), Doom 3 was worth every second the world waited for it.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Halo 2** microsoft / xb
02	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
03	**Final Fantasy XII** square enix / ps2
04	**Star Wars: KOTOR 2** lucasarts / xb
05	**Fable** microsoft / xb

Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Jak 3** sony / ps2
02	**Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders** mgs / xbox
03	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC** bandai / ps2
04	**The Red Star** acclaim / xb
05	**Crash Twinsanity** vu games / xb

Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Second Sight** codemasters / xb
02	**Otogi 2** sega / xb
03	**Galleon** atlus/ xb
04	**Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone** atari/ ps2
05	**Star Wars Battlefront** lucasarts / ps2

Chris Hoffman some editor

01	**Shadow Hearts: Covenant** midway / ps2
02	**Advance Guardian Heroes** ubisoft / gba
03	**Suikoden IV** konami / ps2
04	**Mega Man Zero 3** capcom / gba
05	**WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw** thq / ps2

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Pikmin 2** nintendo / gc
02	**Hot Shots Golf: Fore!** sony / ps2
03	**Final Fantasy XI Online** square enix / pc
04	**Doom 3** activision / pc
05	**Advance Guardian Heroes** ubisoft / gba

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	**ESPN NFL 2K5** sega/take 2 / xb
02	**Gungrave Overdose** mastiff / ps2
03	**Doom 3** activision / pc
04	**Guilty Gear X2 #Reload** majesco / xb
05	**Street Racing Syndicate** namco / ps2

Ghost in the Shell
Stand Alone Complex
Man machine interface

For millions, the journey began with Major Motoko Kusanagi's disrobing and subsequent freefall from the Tokyo skyline—the beginning of a voyage into a realm of cyberspace that seemed absurd at the time but since has become all too plausible. The year was 1996 when Mamoro Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* (based on the manga from Masamune Shirow) left an indelible impression on anyone lucky enough to catch its meteoric rise to the top of the charts. The second feature-length anime to resonate with a widespread U.S. audience following *Akira* (James Cameron was quoted on the box calling it a "stunning work of speculative fiction"), *Ghost in the Shell* introduced us to a new consciousness and the people, or "ghosts," who police it, in a universe where beauty truly is only synthetic skin deep. Cerebral and visually stunning, it was over far too soon, leaving the door wide open for a sequel many feared would never materialize.

A year and change later, the team behind Jumping Flash, Exact, put together an outstanding PlayStation game (released in the states by THQ), and the collective faith was temporarily restored. Even though the game focused solely on the series' super-intelligent spider-like assault vehicles, Tachikomas, it featured one of the most stunning opening cinemas anyone had ever seen, starring, of course, Motoko Kusanagi in all of her cyber-sexy glory.

Fast forward seven long years and we stand on the precipice of not one but three new series incarnations produced in association with the *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* committee: the TV series, *Stand Alone Complex*; *Ghost in the Shell: Innocence*, the theatrical sequel being distributed by DreamWorks' Go Fish Pictures; and this most surprising PS2 game from cavia/Sony Computer Entertainment Japan and Bandai. I say shocking because, even in the wake of animated greatness, most anime-based video games are afterthoughts at best. *Vampire Hunter D, Battle Angel, Evangelion, Gunslinger Girl, Cowboy Bebop, Slayers*...many a great anime has been met with mediocrity on the gameplay scale. Not the case here. In fact, Stand Alone Complex is far and away the best anime-derived video game to date. Gungrave and Fullmetal Alchemist are good games, but SAC is exceptional—a first-party Sony offering that takes the console where it rarely ventures, easily besting the likes of Metal Gear Solid 2 in the engine and graphics department. Not to say that SAC is similar (it's an entirely different game)—it's just that good in terms of detail and model/environment integrity.

Trading missions between Kusanagi and Batou— Kusanagi being the more utilized and well-rounded of the two—cavia mainlines the story directly into the game, often overlapping the action with spoken dialogue delivered by the original cast, as Chief Aramaki micromanages each operation. Together with the banter between Kusanagi and Batou, and the wisdom of Togusa, Section 9's sole human officer, there's rarely a dull or uninformative moment as it filters into the game. Through a myriad of concrete panoramas and mesmerizing sound design, cavia establishes the series' mood early on, drawing us into a state of mind not easily assimilated whilst holding a controller, and never lets up.

While fairly generic in its mission-based structure, the game overall is hard to categorize, combining elements of close-quarters combat, shooting, adventure, platforming and tactical assault. Ranged attacks come by way of an assortment of pulse and sniper rifles, shotguns and the odd shoulder-mounted cannon; melee is a deeply rewarding affair accompanied by position-sensitive dynamic slow-motion camera angles; the platforming is nicely refined; and, when things really get dicey, both Kusanagi and Batou can hack, or dive, into selected enemies' minds to do their

This is where it all begins. Major Motoko Kusanagi reporting for duty.

"...Stand Alone Complex is far and away the best anime-derived video game to date."

dirty work. What's more is that all of these elements are keyed (and configurable) into the shoulder buttons to ensure seamless integration of the gameplay elements with a button specifically for evading (another proximity-sensitive dynamic element), one for firing, one for jumping and one for either melee or your alternate weapon of choice, toggled with the square button—an efficient control scheme to say the least, allowing constant dual analog control in concert with all of the other mechanics.

If anyone remembers Oni—Bungie's big manga-style epic before they made that little game called Halo—consider this as the game that promised to be. It's actually hard to believe this is the same hardware, but the control scheme and game flow are very similar—a design that's finally found its place in time.

Riding on technology in line with Sony's best, Stand Alone Complex is a polished, triple-A import that's flown in under the radar at just the right time. With Smilebit as quiet as a church mouse, Nintendo's output slowed to a crawl and Treasure settling for the odd license or GBA creation, the Major couldn't have picked a better time to slip back into our consciousness. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: cavia
Publisher: Bandai
Available: November

Please proceed to the following pages for further developments. -Section 9 ▶

The outdoor environments in Stand Alone Complex are some of the most impressive ever for PS2. The buildings Kusanagi is overlooking (pictured left) she eventually descends on and inhabits (right) in seamless fashion, with no loading or hits to the framerate.

Security Police Section 9 overview: Key Personnel

ARAMAKI

As Section 9 chief, Aramaki possesses a level of resourcefulness and intelligence in line with Batou and Kusanagi's superior deductive skills. Not one for political motivation, asylum or hogwash, he's all about getting the job done, whatever the cost or repercussions. He's no-nonsense and resolute to the core, but doesn't mind getting his hands dirty in pursuit of duty.

"MAJOR" MOTOKO KUSANAGI

Kusanagi is a mystery, although her nickname suggests she may have served in the military. She's Section 9's head officer, in command of both Batou and Togusa, and an expert in all manners of detaining criminals, be they in the physical or virtual realm. Hand-picked by the Ministry of Home Affairs, she traded her physical body in for a cybernetic one, and is almost completely robotic. A portion of her human brain is all that remains of her human body, while her sub-brain can access any kind of computer network on the Earth.

BATOU

Batou is a hard-ass with a sense of humor, but he's absolutely hardcore when it comes to taking down an enemy. He takes his role supporting Kusanagi very seriously, even though he's often at odds with her gung-ho style. They've been working together for so long that they have become united almost as one. His personal life and true feelings have always been a mystery. Batou is purely cybernetic: 100 percent artificial.

TOGUSA

Hand-picked for the police force by Kusanagi, Togusa is in his late 20s, married and human, except for a portion of his brain connected to the cybernet. Togusa is somewhat out of place among the mostly cyborg officers in Section 9, but Kusanagi believes in and genuinely cares for him. Togusa is a key member, because he can often venture where cyborgs cannot.

Interview

Answered collectively by cavia and Production I.G team members

> "...we designed the game to accentuate the personalities of Motoko and Batou. We believe fans will be pleased with the results."

play: Was this your first first-party Sony game? Did SCEJ hand-pick Amuse Group/cavia for the job?
Production I.G made the original proposal for the game and selected cavia for their proven technological ability and also the level of enthusiasm from their staff. From concept proposal to the final stages of development, both I.G and cavia were involved.

Would you say that it is your most ambitious game to date?
This title was challenging in many ways. Our goal was to recreate an original world, as well as an *original* game—something different from other character-based games. The main character is a cyborg with exaggerated supernatural abilities, so we also focused on satisfying those actions and the basic background (of the character). It was extremely difficult designing the game mechanics for Motoko's stages where the player uses height and high areas to initiate gameplay.

How big is the SAC team? How long did the overall project take?
The maximum number of people the team was composed of was about 50. Project-wise, the scenario took six months to write, and the game development approximately took 15 months. So it has taken about two years from start to finish.

So you must have also worked closely with Production I.G, since the game and TV series came up together.
For the CS broadcast [the *SAC* TV show], the opening visuals were created at cavia. Also, from the start of development, two staff members from the I.G *Ghost in the Shell* television series were stationed at cavia so that they could work together and collaborate effectively.

Is this how the story and timeline for the game were determined in relation to the films and anime?
A story based on the TV series setting was written as original material exclusively for the game. I.G and cavia held many detailed meetings to be able to make this possible within the game.

Did you design this game with a worldwide audience in mind? How has the reception been in Japan?
We were thinking globally, so it has been designed to captivate a worldwide audience. There was a time where we thought it would do better domestically with a more anime flair to it, but we were unexpectedly supported by the *Ghost in the Shell* fans with this game. We are extremely satisfied.

Were you given complete autonomy when it came to the game design?
With the support of the I.G staff, cavia was able to lead the game design. cavia was given the opportunity to design game-original characters such as enemy soldiers and motion designs, so the staff was very enthusiastic.

Initially, while ramping up conceptually, did you also work with Masamune Shirow on getting Motoko just right or in any other facets of the game?
Mr. Shirow participated in the conceptual stages and the development team handled the rest.

Motoko is such a famous and beloved character. Did you feel a great responsibility in getting her just right? You've done an amazing job.
We felt responsible to represent Motoko accurately. Everything from standing position to audio, etc. was created with the intention of creating the same character. In addition to the action and motion sequences, we tried to keep the graphics faithful to the original work and television series. At the same time, we designed the game to accentuate the personalities of Motoko and Batou. We believe fans will be pleased with the results.

This engine, especially when Motoko is outside among huge office complexes, is quite impressive. Is this a new engine, or a modified engine from a past project?
cavia's independent engine technology, the "Ghost in the Shell Project," uses specialized technology and has been finely tuned and customized to create the magnificent scenes seen in the game. The development team was initially worried as to whether this would be possible and whether they would be successful, but everything has gone as planned.

Did you base your environmental designs more on the original film or on the *Stand Alone Complex* TV series?
Based on the art setting/background of the TV series and stage settings of the game scenario, we have arranged it to be game-original. There are objects that appear in the TV series, so if you have some time, you can try and search for them!

Were you inspired by any games in particular in the design and implementation of the gameplay, or is this purely an original interpretation of the material?
Playing many games, we were inspired by many features. But in addition to games, we tried to draw from movies, anime, etc. for inspiration into creating something unique and original. At the same time, we have designed the game to be faithful to the original work and TV series as a service to the fans. For example, the briefing sections that can be seen before each stage have been redesigned for the game so that the player has a more in-depth experience and actually feels as if they are being commanded by Aramaki, compared to the TV series where the briefing movies can only be seen in a small section of the screen.

Watching the anime (actually any of the three) is an almost religious experience. Was translating this into the gamescape your biggest challenge? Was all of the music produced in-house?
Our first priority and biggest challenge was to create an engaging storyline for the game. The music was created and produced under cavia's direction to fit the image of *Ghost in the Shell*. Sound effects were also created in-house by cavia in collaboration with I.G.

Stand Alone Complex stands as the best anime-based video game to date. Did you set out with that goal in mind, to make an anime-based game that does more than just tout a license?
Yes, exactly. We were aware of the fact that games based on anime series tend to focus more on keeping the original image intact and staying faithful to all aspects of the anime. Unfortunately, when this occurs, gameplay becomes neglected. For this game, we wanted those that had high expectations for the gameplay to be satisfied, so it was our first and foremost goal to create an action game that would appeal to the *Ghost in the Shell* fans as well as fans of the action game genre.

It's certainly worked out well with Bandai publishing in the U.S. Not only do they have powerful distribution but an avid fan base, and a real understanding of how to market an anime-based game. Has the U.S. transition been a smooth one? Are you excited for your U.S. debut?

As we were always planning for a worldwide release, the localization was very smooth. Since the movie, *Ghost in the Shell,* has become famous worldwide, there is pressure, but cavia feels it to be a very exciting time. The development team is aiming to improve the quality and is very excited to have the U.S. audience play this game. In addition to slight tweaks here and there, elements that were not in the domestic version have been added to the U.S. release, so its quality has increased. You can say it's "Ghost in the Shell Ver. 1.5." We are confident that it will meet your gameplay expectations.

You've focused the controls on the left analog and shoulder buttons, which works surprisingly well. Is this methodology based on any type of research or testing?

The right analog stick is used to move the camera and as the L buttons on the opposite position are used to shoot; we have devised a system that makes it easy to align the sight and shoot. In the U.S. version, the player will be able to freely configure the L and R buttons.

In terms of length, would you say there's between 10-15 hours of gameplay here for the average player or more?
Average play time is approximately 15-25 hours.

What about any extras to keep players coming back for more?
We have added hidden weapons, added character costumes, added usable characters in the versus stages, additional versus stages, difficulty levels beyond Hard and additional bonuses depending on the time attack and clear scores.

So, the multiplayer appears quite deep. Was this a major focus in the overall project?
Initially, it wasn't part of the specs, but it was something that arose out of the staff's dedication to the project. As a result, I believe it's become a feature that overseas players will appreciate. In the U.S. version, adjustments have been made and stages added to make the gameplay more engaging.

Is there discussion of a sequel yet based on reaction in Japan, or will the sales in the U.S. determine this?
We have no comment regarding a sequel. It has been a wonderful and exciting experience for cavia to create Ghost in the Shell.

Interview
ANIME

Mitsuhisa Ishikawa, CEO, Production I.G

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex

Creative Studio: Production I.G
Released by: Bandai/Manga
Written by Yoshiki Sakurai
Directed by Kenji Kamiyama
Character design by Hajime Shimomura
On DVD now and airing on the Cartoon Network

play: The stories of *Stand Alone Complex* are vastly more accessible to a mainstream audience compared to the original film, and especially *Innocence*. Was the intention to open up the GITS universe to a new, wider demographic or simply to create a more cohesive TV series?
Mitsuhisa Ishikawa: Most of the contemporary anime titles have been catering to the otaku crowd. The stories are made to be complicated and technical to keep those fans happy. But what we tried to do with *Stand Alone Complex* is similar to what Hollywood does—to break down the story and make it more palatable for a mainstream audience. I could see that the director and staff members were definitely in unison in ways to create this animation [to be] more understandable and appealing to a wider audience.

"I could see that the director and staff members were definitely in unison... "

When you created *SAC*, did you focus on a global stage, knowing it would premiere on U.S. TV?
Generally when we create an OVA, it limits the market, and that's why we considered putting it on television in order to make it more popular. Our intentions were to make it successful in Japan, then the other foreign markets would accept it the same way. We didn't necessarily create the show for a global market; we wanted to have the Japanese

market accept the show first and foremost—not just for males, but females as well. That was our objective for creating the show.

How instrumental was Masamune Shirow in the creation of *SAC*?
Ghost in the Shell—there is the manga created by Masamune Shirow, and there was also the film created and directed by Mamoru Oshii. Shirow-san wanted the film to be different from the manga, and wanted the story, a certain incident in Section 9, to be told in a "simplified" way. And this was how *Stand Alone Complex* was made.

The opening cinema and theme song may just be the best ever. Was there a lot of back and forth on it or was it a singular vision?
Between the director and Yoko Kanno (the composer)… Kanno-san does not like it when the director tells her to create the song in a certain way. Basically, the director (Kamiyama-san) had full faith in Kanno-san, thus she was able to have full creativity in creating the theme songs. She also dislikes wars or violence, and the director understood that, plus given the fact that she's not a follower, but a trend-setter, she was able to be in her own world of *Ghost in the Shell* and create the theme songs in her own perspective. Because the director allowed her to be herself to create the songs, she was very excited and fired up to participate in the project. Naturally, the director wanted to tie certain songs with certain scenes; they had a naturally harmony, with everything smooth and coordinated between the director and composer.

Kusanagi seems more confident than ever after Volume 1. Does she remain in control throughout? Does the series have an underlying string or current that builds to a climax?
I think that's the key part in the series, where Kusanagi-san continues to overcome her challenges and obstacles and the character continues to grow stronger and more confident. There were many difficulties in creating the show and showing the main character growing and becoming more confident, but we were able to resolve that through interaction between all the staff members as the production progressed.

What is your take on *Innocence*…too complex? Too little Kusanagi? It's certainly breathtaking.
Creating a movie as opposed to a television series is completely different, and it was important to consider the timing of creating the film at this time. And Oshii-san is a very philosophical person, and the movie reflects that. People are always saying he should include more action in his movies. He deliberately made the movie so that people would leave the movie feeling that there may not have been enough action. It is very difficult to explain. Oshii-san wants to stay as he is and he wants to have the viewers to continue to maintain that feeling of not having enough action and wishes them to continue to critique him in that way.

Speaking of which, *SAC* strikes me as perhaps the most beautiful TV animation ever. Is this the most ambitious TV series Production I.G has ever produced?
In episode 1, the opening scene, where Kusanagi-san captures the criminal—that scene is very famous and the facial expression by the main character truly reflects the expression by Shirow Masamune's character. It was a memorable scene because it really made the original story alive in a TV animation form. And through the efforts of both director Kamiyama-san and Goto-san [the animation director], they created the scene very well. It certainly brought out Kusanagi-san, who is the main character of the story. In episode 2, where the Tachikoma appears, the 2D and 3D graphics were combined…the Tachikoma had a "human-ness" quality that enhanced the quality of the show.

Do you see this as a new beginning? Has the committee

spoken of keeping the brand going beyond the new series?
As you can see, if you watch the first series of *Stand Alone Complex* and compare it with the first and second episode of 2nd Gig [Second Season], you'll notice a dramatic improvement in animation quality and overall quality. In the animation industry, if the animation company creates a high-quality animation like *Stand Alone Complex*, there should definitely be praise given to both the studio and the staff, but to try and top that again with a third season…

How were you able to assist cavia in the creation of the video game? Did you work or consult together?
Just because we are creating a game for *Ghost in the Shell* does not mean that it should be different from the story of the television series. That is why the creative team was involved in the making of the game. cavia did a great job with the graphics, which were as good of quality as the television series. And because the involvement by the I.G creative team, a rivalry between them and cavia emerged making sure the quality level did not drop. This competitiveness is

shown in the actual game, the quality continues to rise, and the end result was a successful one.

I honestly don't understand how you do it. Within the last 12 months (in the West at least), you have given us three of the coolest animated experiences ever in *Kill Bill*, *Dead Leaves* and *SAC*…are you a huge studio now? How are you able to produce so much quality at this pace? Is it new technology, raw talent…or lots of both?
Our general motto is not to make the company big or to hire more people, but it's to create fun films/shows—that is the driving force of our company. I feel that it is very important to continue creating exciting and interesting shows. It was the creation of an environment where the employees continue to give out excitement and creativity, I think, that became today's Production I.G—we still haven't peaked; we're still striving to achieve more. I think it's both [human resource and technology], but as a company we have to make sure that we not exceed our capacity and need braveness to refuse certain projects in order to maintain quality overall. I'm always cautious about that.

Interview

"...I did not make my film with my brain, but I had to talk to my body."

Mamoru Oshii, writer and director of *Ghost In the Shell 2: Innocence*

As I began the interview, Mr. Oshii was discussing the perception of dolls in Japan with National Public Radio...

If [dolls] are not objects, then what are they?
Mamoru Oshii: Maybe if an object has somewhat of a human shape, maybe it could be considered as, instead of an object, it is partly human or it has a soul or it has a spirit—that is why you cannot treat it as garbage. When I said spirit or soul in my movie, in my movie terms I would use ghost. So that's why I decided to use this interesting theme in my movie *Ghost in the Shell 2*...because they cannot dispose of objects as garbage that easily because they believe that, if you have it a long time, a ghost or soul

or spirit develops within that object. Rather than throwing it away, we go through a major ritual where you would cremate or you would burn that object to let it go back to the highest supremacy. Or put it in a boat [and] let it go along the river rather than treating it as garbage. The reason I had dolls as the theme of this movie is that I wanted to talk about what humans really are by using dolls as a comparison. So if you cannot throw away dolls, you can probably not throw away robots either. When humans are starting to get mechanized, then they are considered part robot or half robot by going through that mechanization, then humans really lose their humanity. If that is the case, then how can that human or robot be thrown away very

easily? I wanted to also talk about the border between humans and robots, and I think that border is very ambiguous, so even when a human becomes mechanized, I still think that human is human. So that is why I wanted to talk about [that] in my movie. So there are a lot of movies in Hollywood who have a similar theme such as *AI* and *I, Robot*, but they basically talk about the differences between humans and robots and how robots want to become humans. But I have never seen or encountered any movies that had a theme where humans are wanting to become robots.

play: I'm glad you mentioned that. I actually was going to comment on what I really liked was the idea of humans wanting to be robots. My interpretation, I see this as somewhat of a metaphor for the world we live in today, everyone and everything become increasingly artificial. Our pursuit for perfection, we almost look at artificiality as perfection. By creating these robots in the film, humans are creating a greater image than themselves.
You are absolutely right about that people have lost their natural body [and that] they want to pursue their most ideal body. For example, technology has made that possible and made it reachable. It has always been that way since a long time ago. When people wanted to look strong, powerful they would wear an animal's head or they would put on tattoos. So that notion has never changed; it is just that recently technology has just made it more convenient.

As you write a movie like this, are you looking at it as more a reality, as someplace we are heading, than an actual work of fiction—as something that you perceive as inevitable?
...I wanted to say that is already the case. It is already inevitable; it is already too late to stop. People should not fear that change; they should just accept it.

Ghostly imagery:
Say what you will about an impenetrable story, but there's no denying this film's astounding visions.

I read a quote, I believe it was in France—you said all forms of life are equal. Dogs, androids, humans. What, to you, defines the value of life?

That I cannot answer right away, and the fact that I cannot answer that right away is the major problem that human beings have. I don't know any scientist or any philosophers or anybody in this world that was able to give a good answer to that question. The same thing could probably be said, "What is the soul?" And I think perhaps the use of calling it the ghost, calling it what you will, and so many religions define it in one specific way. Perhaps in the same way, what is the soul? Perhaps there is no answer.

Going back eight or nine years ago with the original *Ghost in the Shell,* it became a classic, very highly respected among film fans and anime fans. Making this new film, did that add pressure to the process? Were you more self-conscious going in? Did you feel you had to live up to some expectations?

No, because I was so ready not to meet their expectations. The only success to making a sequel to the first movie is to make it a completely different movie. If you make it a similar movie, then it will become a failure eventually. That was my response to the film. It did carry a different tone, a different feel, and I liked that it was unexpected. It was visually astounding. But it definitely carried a different weight than the first one, and that's what I liked about it. So betraying the public's expectation is not a wrong thing to do as a filmmaker. What you need to do is to make the film better than their expectations.

Did you struggle with whether to not make Kusanagi a main character?

That is actually the first idea I had in mind…to not make her the main character. The original comic book still has the main character. But I wanted to make my movie where she disappears completely and another person searches for her. So this is a completely imaginary new creation. So I know the movie would be a success if the main character Batou goes on a search for Motoko and he eventually encounters his own body.

You asked me earlier if I understood the film. Correct me if I'm wrong, but part of the way I looked at this film is that there were a lot of intentional ambiguities, a lot of questions that were left hanging. Am I right in the fact that it was a more philosophical film…and perhaps its intention was to leave a lot of things open where you could look at it almost on a spiritual level and really take some very personal things from it?

You are right about the film being ambiguous. It is because I did not make my film with my brain, but I had to talk to my body. But I don't like it when people view this movie as a philosophical movie, because I didn't intend on doing that. I wanted to portray philosophy in a more emotional way, and I personally think that the movie had that idea in it. I am starting to think that out of all the movies I created, this is the most emotional movie ever.

In the year 2032, humans have purposely become the endangered species, striving to shed their inferior corporal bodies for the perceived perfection of mechanical beings. Souls, or ghosts, are transferred to fill the shell of the cyborgs created in humanity's image. Awareness, it is argued, a need to ponder and think, is what eats us from within. Better to be pristine and artificial than deal with the trivialities of thought.

Most works of science fiction toying with the idea of robots portray a yearning to be human. *Ghost in the Shell 2: Innocence* is intriguingly unique in that it explores a world where the artificial life dominates and the humans that create it yearn to be more artificial; the deeper meaning to the why is left underdeveloped, leaving us to draw our own conclusions in the discussions the film inspires.

As *Innocence* opens, we learn of a series of murders carried out by pleasure units, called gynoids. Mysteriously, these porcelain beauties, unsettling in their blank stares, self-destruct, raising even more questions.

Sent in to investigate are cyborg detective Batou, who returns from the original *Ghost in the Shell*, and his new, far more human partner, Togusa. Batou struggles with the memory of his old friend and partner, the Major, languishing stoically in his dour apartment as he goes through his routine of feeding his basset hound; however advanced and mechanical the world has become, loneliness sure does seem to be a terrible plague. The film is not afraid of quiet moments like this, allowing the pensive mood to build a sense of sadness and question. How interesting it is to see the semblance of a human brain left in these cyborgs continue to dictate their arguably evolved existence.

Togusa and Batou are constantly caught in disconnected philosophical exchanges, tossing around quotes from the Bible to Milton to Descartes. My reaction to the first viewing of *Innocence* was that the film is too talky and overwrought, throwing away resonant characters in exchange for nonsensical bantering that loosens the film's tight hold. Upon second viewing, I began to see a greater richness, a provocative undercurrent of theme and effect. Writer and director Mamoru Oshii intentionally keeps his figures speaking in spontaneous bursts of ambiguity—some very brilliant, subtle visual cues bring a higher meaning to the surface—and while it does keep us at an emotional distance, the film's never boring. In this equally dreamlike, strange world, it becomes natural that its inhabitants speak in such a deliberate manner. "The way you spout these spontaneous exotic references, I'd say your own external memory's pretty twisted," exclaims Batou to a disinterested Togusa, who stares somberly out their ship's window into the endless swirl of clouds devouring a towering metropolis below. "Look who's talking!" he responds.

The hypnotic luster of *Innocence*'s images can't be denied. No doubt the film would be more interesting than transfixing without its astounding visions, which often sink into heavy pockets of shadows and dark, somber tones. Instead of excess, Oshii chooses tasteful inclusions of CG embellishment, carving dimension and space at just the right moments. This is a beautiful world, and a sad world, a place you watch with intrigue but shake at the thought of existing in.

Notice how still the animation is. Characters often settle in long pauses, and shots linger, allowing the mood to wash over us. Even the climactic final battle, a graceful, dazzling display that serves as much more than the typical big-bang exit, refuses to be framed with rapid-fire cuts and emotionless style. It's not so much visceral as it is a quiet opera of explosive paintings. Where Americans too often create and view violence as cool, here we see the Japanese artists treating it as beauty.

Some of the ideas in *Innocence* are typical and recycled: how do we know if this is reality? Are we the architects of our own demise? The film throws out general thoughts more than exploring them for emotional depth, and the characters don't really go anywhere. But once we are carried to the tragic end, it all boldly comes together for sudden impact.

The greatest flaw is that we sit as mere observers, certainly mesmerized, fascinated, impressed, primed for discussion, yet left with a certain detachment, a lack of feeling for the inhabitants. The film's emotion is as artificial as the beings it represents. Perhaps that is part of its intention. As cold as it all is, we walk away surrendering to a strange wonder. **Brady Fiechter**

Ratchet & Clank
Up Your Arsenal
Yes, it's online now, but the new features don't stop there

If you're interested enough in the Ratchet series to be reading this—and if you're lucky, you experienced one of the best games of last year with Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando—then you're probably already aware that Ratchet & Clank is now going online, there's even more weapons to deal with, new worlds, expanded gameplay, and…well, it's just everything Insomniac has been learning from before in a familiar yet newly refined package. And it's not done yet, so I'm going to bite my enthusiastic tongue until the review and let vice-president of gameplay Brian Hastings, online designer Cory Stockton and the rest of the Up Your Arsenal team fill you in on what's going on as they work on a difficult repeat. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Insomniac Games
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

"Do you talk about the game incessantly with your buddies? Do you sacrifice sleep, social life and sanity for the game?"

Ted Price, president/CEO, Insomniac Games

Interview
The Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal team, Insomniac Games

play: Going Commando was an admirable leap beyond the original. It's not often you get a sequel that does that much new that much better. Now that you're onto the third installment, what can you possibly do to reach that same level of improvement?
Brian Hastings, VP gameplay: After we finished Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando, I felt the same way. I didn't think it would be possible to raise the bar that much further. However, now being mere days away from completion, I'm 100 percent certain that Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal is an even bigger leap than Going Commando. The story, voice acting and animation in the game are by far the best work we've ever done. There are several scenes in the game that I think will stick with you long after you finish. And as good as the weapons in Going Commando were, the arsenal in this game blows them away. I think that Keith Lee, Insomniac Games' weapons programmer, has created the most entertaining set of weapons and upgrades in video game history. If the fifth level upgraded Disc-blade gun doesn't blow you away, then I'm going to find another line of work. Oh yeah, and then there's multiplayer. Our core online team of Cory Stockton (designer), Scott Reeser, Eric Ellis and Sam Christiansen (programmers) has put together the freshest and most addictive online game on the PlayStation 2 this year. I know that sounds cocky, but what these guys have pulled off this year is absolutely amazing. The single-player game alone is a major leap forward for the series, but I think the multiplayer experience will be the defining factor in the game. Just try

playing an all Morph-o-Ray online Deathmatch battle and you'll see what I'm talking about.

What about this latest adventure mostly separates it from Going Commando?
Brian Allgeier, design director: Aside from the multiplayer portion of the game, RC: UYA features a huge single-player adventure that matches the scope of the previous games. This time the focus is on the battle mission. Ratchet and Clank team up with some allied robots known as the Galactic Rangers to accomplish missions involving ground vehicles, Hoverships and all-out ground warfare. Players can freefall from high above into a raging battle, race around the environment in a TurboSlider and eliminate enemies with the mounted turret, pilot a Hovership and blast anti-aircraft guns, or fight on the ground using Ratchet's arsenal of 15 all-new weapons. The battle missions are a great way of earning money and experience, which ultimately helps Ratchet buy more powerful weapons, upgrade them and increase his strength.

What sort of new challenges are you facing?
Allgeier: The multiplayer portion of the game has been our biggest challenge. There are so many technical hurdles, design challenges and art issues that need to be addressed to produce a fun multiplayer experience—which, I might add, I believe we accomplished. Fortunately, we also have elements from a rich single-player game that provide even more great

gameplay. Many of the weapons and gadgets are a lot of fun in a multiplayer setting. These elements, combined with the new strategic features like nodes and vehicle gameplay, have made the multiplayer game very rich, and it competes with the single-player portion in terms of overall depth and size. So I guess our biggest challenge is that we really made two games in one.

How'd the retro side-scrolling sequences come about?
Sean Wissler, designer: Many of us here at Insomniac Games are fans of the old-school side-scrolling platformers from the 8-bit and 16-bit days. We also have a lot of fans of the totally shameless super hero that is Captain Qwark, and wanted to make sure that he was featured prominently in Up Your Arsenal. So we brainstormed the idea of featuring Qwark as a playable character, where the player would discover Qwark's history by taking him through a series of interactive Vid-Comics featuring classic side-scrolling gameplay.

Is there much internal debate about how much platforming to put in the game? It's become more of a tactical shooter, but you obviously aren't limiting your design approach.
Hastings: The platforming roots are still there, but they're very tightly blended in with the shooting action. Ratchet is really very nimble and acrobatic compared to characters from standard shooters. Advanced players will use the strafing flip jumps, double jumps and back jumps while simultaneously

behind rocks, swing down vines, peek out from around corners, etc. This was done to heighten the feel that you were battling against intelligent characters.

This series is ultimately lighthearted. Was there every a temptation to turn the series on its ear and go an entirely different direction?
Hastings: We joke about it sometimes. Let's see, how can we work more hookers into the story? What if Clank turned "edgy" and grew a goatee? Ultimately you've got to stick with making games that you personally believe in. We don't want to grab onto the latest market whim, because who knows how long it will last? And more importantly, you have to stay true to yourselves and to your fans. We believe in the direction we took when we made Ratchet & Clank, and we believe in the characters and the world we created. The lighthearted humor is a big part of why we enjoy making the games so much and I think in the long run it makes the games more timeless and collectible. To use a movie analogy, there are a dozen mega-hit action movies every summer, but a year later everyone has forgotten them. Meanwhile, people are still buying *Toy Story* and *Shrek* on DVD each year. People are still buying the Spyro games for the PS1 while most of the violent games that outsold it at the time are long forgotten. I think if you create something timeless and lighthearted, you're making something that people want to keep.

What, to you, separates a good game from a great game?
Ted Price, president/CEO: How much space do I have to reply? There are just so many different factors that go into a great game experience, and I think that most people who play games know them inherently even if they aren't used to enunciating them. Gameplay balancing, story consistency, camera and control responsiveness, enemy intelligence—the list goes on forever. But for a lot of us here at Insomniac Games, it's more about a game's ability to keep your attention for more than a few hours. For example, do you think about it when you're not playing it? Do you talk about the game incessantly with your buddies? Do you sacrifice sleep, social life and sanity for the game? If you answer "yes" to these questions, then I think you're playing a great game versus a good game.

I think the experience system, the way you build up your characters and weapons, is an awesome touch to the game. Are you a little surprised it came out as well as it did? I think it adds more to the game than I ever imagined it would in concept.
Eric Christensen, director of gameplay: When we were adding this element to Ratchet & Clank: Going Commando, we weren't certain how it would be received. After countless amounts of positive remarks from people previewing the game, we knew we had a winning element. I have always been a fan of power and weapon upgrades in games, so I am in love with the idea of being able to do that in Ratchet & Clank. It's proven to be such a great addition to the gameplay that we've included the same idea in Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal with a much larger upgrade path. I feel this adds a great deal of balance to the game as well as an added replay value since people are inclined to play over and over again, upgrading weapons in a different way than before.

Have there been any surprise snafus during the development process? I'm sure even after two games in the can, you're bound to be hit with something.
Allgeier: The development process is all about surprise snafus. From the funny ones, like Ratchet accidentally getting scaled down to 10 percent (which was inspiration for the Spider-Bot in Going Commando) to major headaches like the server going down near deadline time. One time I made the big mistake of switching in a new version of the game for an internal focus group and a bug made everyone lose their saves (four hours into playing)—that went over real well. We make every attempt to avoid snafus, but with 100+ people on the team, they are bound to happen around deadline time.

firing their weapons, and it leads to some pretty cool-looking John Woo-style firefights in multiplayer. In a typical online game, you'll see a player charge the enemy base in a vehicle, jump out of the vehicle as it plunges into the enemy's defense trench, grab the swingline in midair, vault over the enemies' heads and attack them from behind all in a matter of a few seconds. The Ratchet franchise has always been about preserving the core concepts that make platformers fun while finding new ways to introduce more action into the genre. In the single-player game in Up Your Arsenal, we made a conscious decision to add more challenges that blended both shooting and classic platforming. The result, the "gauntlet"

challenges, are a fast-paced mix of old-school precision timing and adrenaline action that turned out to be really fun.

It seems like you've done a lot of work on adding more animations to characters in the world. Maybe I'm just enjoying the new enemies and designs, or was this a point of emphasis?
Oliver Wade, animation director: With the characters in Up Your Arsenal, we put a lot of emphasis on expanding the amount of moves the enemies could do. We tried to make them feel more alive by giving them multiple attacks and having new ways to introduce them. Some jump out from

What would you say is the biggest thing you've learned from the past two games that you can take to the making of Up Your Arsenal?

Allgeier: Stay focused and build off what made the first two games great. When making a third installment to the series, it is often tempting to design something completely different and deviate from the core gameplay of the original. For example, players really liked the arenas and enemy counts found in Going Commando. Based off that feedback, we've created more opportunities for upgrading weapons and earning cash. In the Battlefield missions, we are taking the core weapons and enemy gameplay and putting it in a more engaging context.

Name a game that perhaps inspired you guys to make the Ratchet series.

Hastings: The Ratchet series owes its creative inspiration to hundreds of ideas from everyone in the company. The very original concept came from a big brainstorming session where we were all pitching all kinds of exciting new directions. At that meeting I proposed making a character based on a blend of Marvin the Martian and Spaceman Spiff from Calvin and Hobbes. The possibilities seemed limitless: interplanetary travel would allow for new freedoms in production design, a futuristic galaxy would let us do things that were impossible in the traditional fantasy settings of platformers, and high-tech weapons and gadgets would create all-new forms of gameplay. The concept evolved rapidly from there as David Guertin and Oliver Wade came up with and named the characters and everyone started coming up with new possibilities and ideas. I guess the original idea didn't really come from any particular game; I was just asking myself: "if I could be any fictional character in a video game, who would it be?" For some reason, Marvin the Martian and Spaceman Spiff came to mind.

And finally: What is the defining factor to an Insomniac game?

Price: What's most important for us has always been to first and foremost create a high "fun factor." This can be defined in a lot of different ways, but essentially that means that everything you actually do in the game has to be, well, fun! If what you're doing at any time is tedious, repetitive, boring, frustrating or makes you want to abandon the game, it doesn't

matter how beautiful the environments are or how cool the characters look—the game just isn't going to work. Also, even though the game may look beautiful, have cutting-edge technology and an engaging story, if the core mechanic isn't fun, what's the point of making it? For example, when we began working on the online component of RC: UYA, we didn't bother with trying to implement different modes or great AI for the bots. We didn't worry about lobby features or other bells and whistles. We simply built a small arena with two playable characters [and] a few weapons, and tweaked it until it was fun to blast the crap out of each other. Once we had that, we knew that we had a solid foundation and gained the confidence that the multiplayer portion of the final game would have that all-important fun factor.

Ratchet online

What prompted you guys to take the Ratchet series online?

Cory Stockton, online designer: It's something that we always wanted to do. We have always felt that our wacky weapons would lend themselves really well to a multiplayer experience. We also really wanted to open up online gameplay to a whole new audience. We take a slapstick look at online gameplay so players can feel welcome to try it out and not feel like they will get whooped right away.

Was it your intention to stick close to the look and feel of the single-player game?

Stockton: Yes. We wanted to make sure from the beginning that the online gameplay maintained the feel of the single-player experience. Most games tend to have a multiplayer option that does not live up to the standards of the single-player experience, and we did not want to fall into that category.

Did you ever question if fans would respond to taking this type of game online?

Eric Ellis, online programmer: I think the key to pleasing fans for us has always been to be our own biggest fans. Even after putting all the insane hours we do into building these games, most of us can't wait to get the chance to play through that final build when we've finished each game. So, we took that

same mentality into the online mode, and from the beginning we figured we had a hit when people started having way too much fun lobbing gravity bombs in a battle of Ratchets. What we decided is that since Ratchet games excel at bringing cool weapons that are amazingly fun to use into a genre where they hadn't been exploited before, what could be more fun for the fans than taking those weapons and using them on their buddies?

Where's one area you see online games needing the biggest improvement?

Sam Christiansen, online programmer: The area of online gaming that needs the most improvement is the lobby—the place where you meet up with friends, find games, check out stats and participate in the online community for a game. I want to be able to check my stats and ranking from a web browser. I want to IM my friends in-game from my PC. My clan should have its own mailing list to remind members of games. The lobby needs to be easier to use and should be integrated with all the other devices that we plug into the Internet. However, I'm proud to say that I believe we addressed many of these issues with the Up Your Arsenal online lobby. Whether you want to check someone's profile and stats, invite them to a game, join a clan or send a private message, it's easy to do with a few simple controller toggles without having to navigate a maze of menus.

You've still only released a smattering of hands-on play for us to get a taste of what Ratchet will be like online. What, to you, will ultimately be its biggest draw?

Hastings: I think one of the best things about the online mode is the lobby. The support for clans and clan battles is especially nice because it really promotes teamwork and rivalries. We also track almost 100 different stats so you'll get to see how you and your clan stack up against the rest of the field in all kinds of categories. I also really like how the buddy lists are handled. Right from the very top online menu you can see a list of all your buddies who are online and you can just select any one of them and join their current location. And when you're in a room, your buddies are sorted to the top of the list of players so you always know who's there. That sounds like subtle stuff, but it makes a big difference when you play the game. As for the gameplay, I wouldn't know where to start. The strategic depth of Siege mode, the chaotic fun of an all Morph-o-Ray Deathmatch battle, the adrenaline

The side-scrolling sequences are a fantastic new addition.

"We wanted to make sure from the beginning that the online gameplay maintained the feel of the single-player experience."

Cory Stockton, online designer, Insomniac Games

rush of a dual TurboSlider ambush on the enemy base, turning your foe into a sheep and chasing him down with the wrench—there's just no one thing I can pinpoint as my favorite. Ultimately, I guess, the best thing is that it introduces a kind of gameplay that just isn't out there in the online market right now, and I hope that's something people enjoy as much as we do.

You think network play is indeed the future? It's a pretty big deal to see the resources being put into this. Will online presence be a growing concern for later Insomniac titles?

Price: Absolutely. I'd be very surprised if 80 percent or more of the titles released on the next generation of hardware don't have online components. Even though solo play can often be a very rewarding experience, once you've experienced online play, it's hard to discount it as a passing fancy. Plus the number of new online players is growing at a tremendous rate—fueled by more and more online games. We at Insomniac Games believe online is here to stay and you can bet that all future Insomniac Games titles will offer online features. You heard it here first! **play**

The Lord of the Rings
The Third Age

The monumental question: American turn-based RPG plus Lord of the Rings equals…?

When I think back on what games used to grab me the most, I point to turn-based RPGs as my greatest love. Maybe you can relate—the ones that were traditional fantasy, where colorful sidekicks fought by your side, plundering dungeons and wandering villages and exploring caves and forests, equipping all sorts of powerful tools, building strength and understanding on the path to destroying monsters for the sake of the world. Just writing that makes me smile.

I haven't felt that spirit of old in…well, since Final Fantasy IX—one of the very few games I've ever been truly moved by. I loved that game and everything it stood for in what is pure and right about my favorite games: rich fantasy envisioning a magical, completely made-up world, a densely developed story, a growing empowerment of heroes, a sprawling place of bold imagination where I feel bound.

Something about Lord of the Rings: The Third Age captures that spirit immediately. I've played very little of the game, see some flaws, have no idea where it's heading, but I do know I'm intrigued.

Of course, there's the transfixing presence of the Lord of the Rings universe: the art, the background, the inspiration, the parallels to the film trilogy. EA is blessed with an overflow of raw material to throw in their toolbox—and as the craftsmen who created the incredible action game Return of the King, their skills are many. It must certainly help that Steve Gray, who was on the Final Fantasy VII project back in the day, is on board as executive producer for added guidance.

Here we have a turn-based RPG that parallels the classics in a lot of ways, most noticeably in battle. The party, composed of up to six mostly bit and peripheral figures from the trilogy—you'll meet more prominent figures as the journey deepens—takes its turn in battle, confronting random, gorgeously drawn beasts on the path to newfound cities and landscapes, endlessly receiving experience and necessary goods along the way.

Traditional in many respects may mean derivative to some—I would like to see a more inventive treasure reward other than randomly scattered chests—and the thought of an American developer dipping into what has been exclusively Japanese territory since the beginning of gaming brings obvious questions. The biggest one: can Lord of the Rings: The Third Age possibly match our favorites of old?
Brady Fiechter

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA
Publisher: EA
Available: November

"Here we have a turn-based RPG that parallels the classics in a lot of ways, most noticeably in battle."

Outrun 2

Let the good times roll

If ever a franchise warranted a full-blown update, it's Outrun, and Sega-AM2, Sumo Digital and Ferrari have come together to make it something X-tra special. A shiny remake would have sufficed just fine, but AM2 has gone to great lengths to make it so much more, delivering a deep, well-rounded, immensely fun racing experience while staying true to the series' roots. The arcade mode is as you'd expect, incorporating vintage Sega arcade feel into a gorgeous Xbox rendition of the ever-changing landscapes made famous by the coin-op and Genesis games as you speed through themed stages, avoiding traffic and pleasing your lady. Taking the arcade gameplay a step further, they've added an additional Time Attack mode and Heart Attack—a mode dedicated solely to impressing your lady. The more you impress her, obeying her every command by drifting, passing, sticking to colored lanes, etc., the more enamored she becomes, culminating in an array of real-time affection (animated hearts and icons light up the screen) and snuggly endings. But they didn't stop there. Next up is Challenge Mode, where you'll find Party Missions (assorted multiplayer fun), the ultra-comprehensive Mission Mode consisting of 101 missions to unlock a treasure trove of Ferrari goodies and game extras—Knockout, a last-man-standing race to the finish, Crazy Convoy, an exercise in passing to stay in the heat, and Single Race—all of which are fair to deep excursions, rather than the cheap minigames you might expect. You can also jump on Live and race up to eight people on any unlocked course. All this, plus we get to groove once again to the smooth stylings of "Splash Wave," "Magic Sound Shower" and "Passing Breeze," along with some sticky new tunes that echo that ultra-cool Sega arcade vibe. As their next trick, perhaps MGS can make Daytona 2 appear. Now that would make for some blue-blue skies. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Sega-AM2/Sumo Digital
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: October

"A shiny remake would have sufficed just fine, but AM2 has gone to great lengths to make it so much more..."

Scurry across 15 tracks behind the wheel of the Enzo, Dino 246 GTS, 365 GTS/4 Daytona, Testarossa, 360 Spider, 288 GTO, F40 or F50.

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The Bard's Tale

Don't reinvent a genre, simply have lively fun with it

The first self-effacing task you'll face in The Bard's Tale is a rat housecleaning in the dank basement of a local bar. A poor, petite maiden with breasts too large to be categorized kindly requests your services in exchange for "a warm place to lay your head," the camera punctuating her offer with a lingering shot of the ample reward. Following your role-playing instincts, before you descend into the darkness, you converse with the patrons, coming across a group of drunks who break out in song and dance, extolling the virtues of their favorite ale.

And so it goes with The Bard's Tale, a familiar top-down action-RPG running off the superbly capable Champions of Norrath engine that uses referential humor to poke fun at the endless conventions we've all come to love in the genre. Off to hack down monsters and interact with the many townsfolk, you, the sardonic, irreverent bard, aren't looking to save the world; you just want all the fame and fortune you can possibly muster.

The bard goes it alone at first, puny sword and rat friend by his side, but with his unique ability to summon helpers with song, the quest gets a big dose of added flavor and strategy as the action heats up. Up to five allies from a big mix can be called on at any one time, providing help at the cost of mana. The bard himself can be lightly tailored to your specifications, and experience is used to build his typical attributes.

Every angle of the game is given a jokey spin, and the omnipresent flow of gags is genuinely fun, lifted by colorful direction and voice acting. But it'd be a disservice not to emphasize that The Bard's Tale is also a fun action-role player, lively and filled with spirited sights and sounds that create a rich and raucous setting. Who knew you'd once be playing a game like this and walk away whistling, literally, its virtues? **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: inXile
Publisher: VU Games
Available: November

"Every angle of the game is given a jokey spin, and the omnipresent flow of gags is genuinely fun..."

The humor's all fine and dandy, but behold the grand power of the Norrath engine.

We Gave **Boss Monsters** Their First Job.
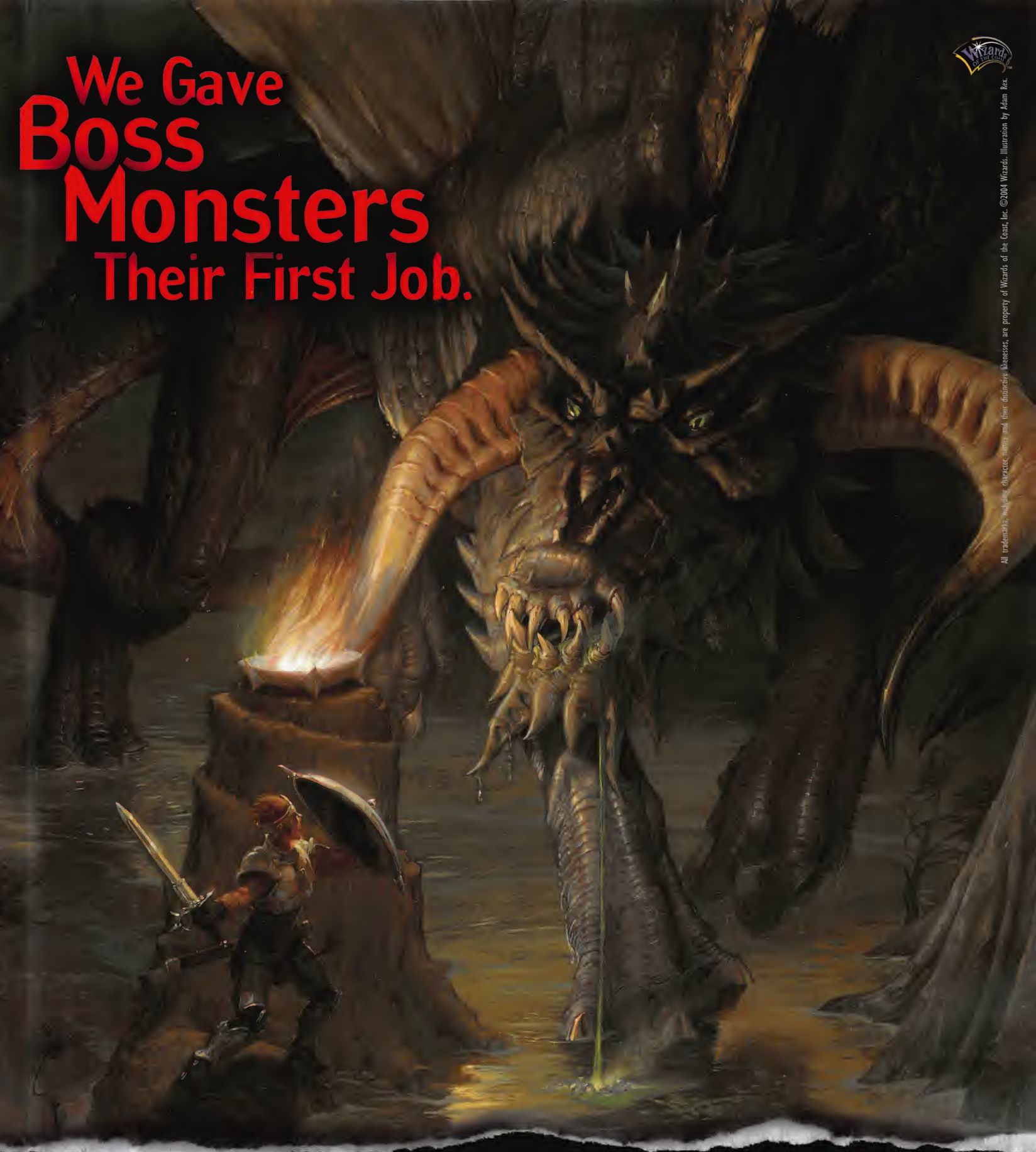
Cracking skulls on the way to fight the Big Bad Guy started in the DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® roleplaying game. And with thousands of monsters to fight and countless ways to customize them, it's still the best way to go to work.

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Suikoden IV

Set sail for another glorious RPG

The Rune of Punishment. As one of the 27 True Runes, it grants vast power to its bearer, allowing him to do great things, drawing people from all walks of life within his sphere of influence. But the Rune also brings hardship, and, since it drains the host's life force with each use, death is never far away. In an archipelago south of Suikoden 1's Toran Republic, 150 years prior to the fall of that game's Scarlet Moon Empire, the Rune of Punishment makes its way into the possession of a young man, and the stage is set for another emotion-laden epic in the form of Suikoden IV.

Suikoden IV is a bit of a contradiction, in some ways harkening back to the style of classic RPGs—not entirely surprising since writer/producer/character designer Junko Kawano is a veteran of the first Suikoden—while at the same time moving the series into tantalizing new territory. The game's ocean-based setting opens the door for battles against massive sea creatures, fantastic encounters of the mermaid kind, clashes with ruthless pirates where new ship-to-ship strategy battles ensue and, in more relaxing times, the addition of a new fishing minigame.

Suikoden IV also moves forward with an enhanced graphics engine, featuring a user-controlled camera and models vastly superior to what was seen in part III, along with the intricate anime-style character and world designs the series is known for. Composer Masahiko Kimura (who also wrote the music for Suikoden III) is intentionally adding a more stirring feel to the soundtrack this time around, while the inclusion of voiceovers adds to the overall polish.

The combat, meanwhile, sports a back-to-basics attitude, with players once again having full control over all of their party members in a battle system that features Suikoden trademarks like combo moves and rune-based magic attacks (which can now be unified). To speed up battles, a common group inventory has been introduced, and the active combat party has been reduced from six to a more conventional four, which doesn't seem to negatively impact gameplay at all. Also worth noting is that the complex skill system from Suikoden III has been abandoned.

As always, a diverse cast—including humans, elves, animal races and more—unites under the hero as the 108 Stars of Destiny in his constantly evolving castle, and, despite the time difference, recognizable characters such as seer Lady Leknaat, runemaster Jeane and flighty teleporter Viki will make appearances, along with Elenor Silverburg, progenitor to the famed family of strategists from previous Suikoden games. The drama of human relationships also appears to play a pivotal role, as the friendship between the hero and his comrade Snowe seems primed for maximum emotional impact.

As someone who spent more than 100 hours engrossed in Suikoden III (not to mention earlier games), I couldn't be more excited for the next chapter. Unfortunately for myself and other North American Suikoden fans, Konami recently announced that the game has been delayed until January 2005—but it should be worth the wait. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: January 2005
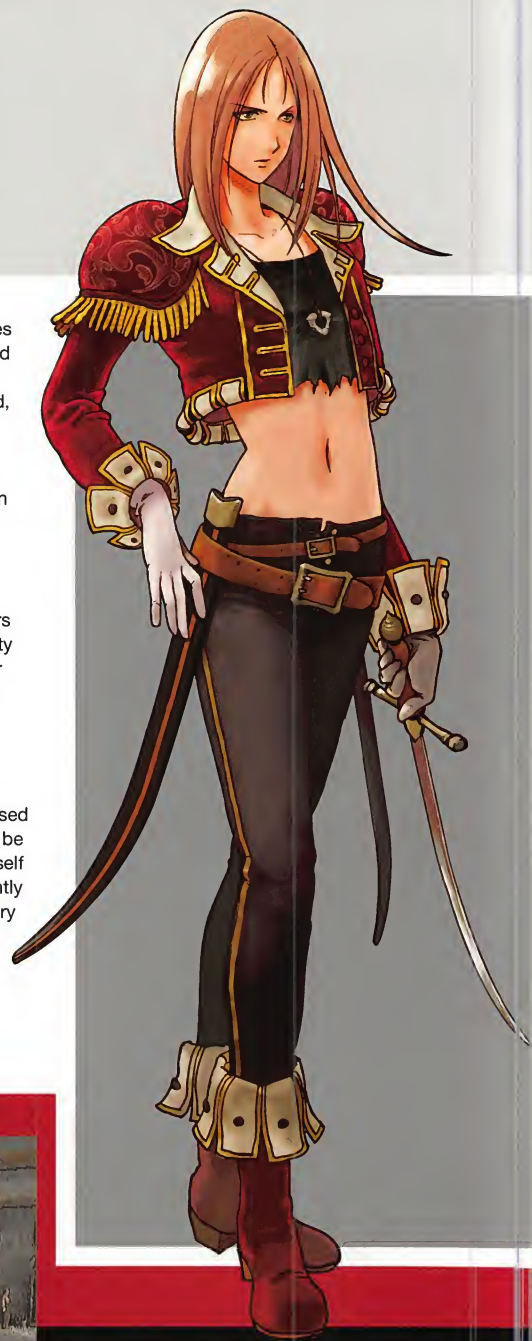
One-on-one duels, a Suikoden staple, make their return.
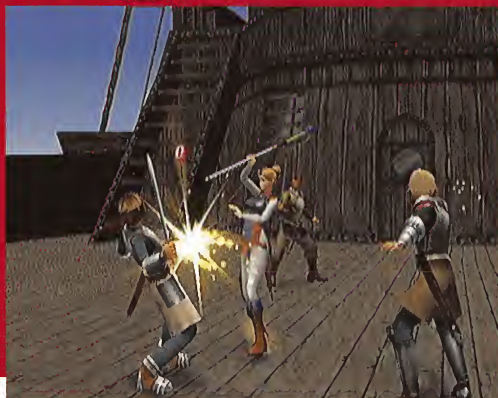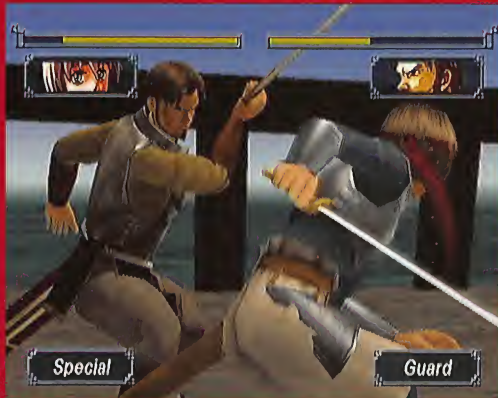
Special

Guard

Snowe
Is everyone ready?!

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Alien Hominid

He'll pass on the probe....

Missing 2D? Thirsting for a mega-dose of old school dressed in next-gen splendor? Hmmm...well, how about one dressed in crude flash animation... dressed in next-gen splendor? The polar opposite to the current run of big-budget epics, Alien Hominid got its start on the web, where it caught on so big that his creators decided to send him to the big show, dressing up their little game that could with some serious firepower to go with its irreverent, totally un-PC gameplay. He's just a cute little yellow alien who happened to crash land in front of FBI headquarters, so why does the government want him so very dead? This we shall probe. Hominid's in a fight for his life, slicing through swarming G-men like spurting human ham hocks, in a tongue-embedded-in-cheek-so-hard-it's-bruising action romp that plays like Gunstar Heroes on a 12-pack of Double Shots.

They just keep coming...armada after armada, wave after wave, behemoth after behemoth. From flame-throwing men in black to screen-filling, mechanized science fair rejects, the government goons want public enemy number one reduced to a little Hominid mustard stain, and only through the miracle of retro-style gaming can we save him. The hyper-sadistic hack 'n' slash and shooting action is flanked by classic Defender/Asteroids shooting stints, along with the occasional tank run and more pattern-based shot dodging than you can shake a ray gun at, infused with 32-bit era trickery like mega-explosions and a zooming camera to fit the massive bosses in frame. The game is an absolute throwback gas, although, in its previewable state, it was plagued with slowdown, hard-to-see enemy fire and balance issues. You want a game like this to be difficult to the extent that you can eventually finish a level nearly unscathed, but currently Hominid is so out of whack they have to pre-load it with nearly unlimited lives.

With a little tweaking, Alien Hominid could become the success story of the year and pave the way for a slew of cheap-to-make, highly contagious 2D entertainment, which would be beyond dandy. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: O3 Games
Publisher: Behemoth
Available: October

Check the Bangai-o style shooting! That Hominid is one wily alien!

"They just keep coming...armada after armada, wave after wave, behemoth after behemoth."

"We have SOLID proof of their weapons of mass destruction."

—October 16, 1962

Blood Will Tell

Meat puppet massacre

Blood Will Tell feels like a game Sega might have made back in the day—a natural progression following in the otherworldly footsteps of games like Altered Beast and Mystic Defender. It's of that increasingly rare Japanese man-versus-demon ilk that suspends disbelief to the extent that you become wrapped in its video game doctrine all the more. The story is wrought with unthinkable pain, yet has no qualms about zapping you back to reality each time the protagonist, Hyakkimaru, happens upon a shining save point and lets out a helpful "I can save the game here…" He may be smack-dab in the middle of reclaiming his internal organs from a pack of omnipotent demons, but he's never too busy to remind you that the huge, brightly lit umbrella you've been saving under for 20 hours still works.

While Hyakkimaru lay in his mother's womb, his father made a deal with 48 "fiends," granting them his newborn son's anatomy in exchange for otherworldly power—an act of ancient child abuse the infant somehow survived. Reduced to a hollow, limbless, organless lump of humanity, he was taken in by a physician, Jyukai, and fitted with working innards and artificial limbs, alive but dead inside…unable to see in color (the game begins in black and white—cool touch), hear, eat or feel. Using his acute telepathic skills to communicate, Jyukai raised Hyakkimaru as his own until the day the demons—and the game developers—came calling. The tale henceforth, penned by *Astro Boy* creator Osamu Tezuka (heralded as the Japanese Walt Disney) is of Hyakkimaru's pilgrimage to slay the 48 fiends, reclaim his body parts and fulfill his destiny.

With the diminutive, clingy, ever-mischievous and surprisingly powerful Dororo at Hyakkimaru's side, Blood Will tell is a not-so-typical hack-and-slash adventure made fresh by episodic gameplay harnessed within a wonderfully nomadic framework. If you remember the old *Kung Fu* TV series, imagine that with shades of Sword of Berserk on Dreamcast and you're halfway home. While there does exist inherent filler such as rudimentary puzzles and repetitious killing between key areas, these otherwise yawn-inducing adventure trademarks are made palatable by a unique move set, some deliciously twisted creature designs and

gorgeous renditions of the Japanese countryside and wilderness. The Hyakkimaru and Dororo models are striking as well (easily Sega's best since Shinobi, with exceptionally stellar detail on their necks and faces), as is the animation—although awkward during walking, it is very good overall. There's no animation for stairs or slope sensitivity to speak of, but for what it is, this is a nicely buttoned-up package.

Using Hyakkimaru's embedded blades and nimble moves, there's also much joy in the game's evolving combo, weapon and magic system (he's fitted with a leg cannon and the literal definition of a firearm), complimented by Dororo's platform/action/sneaky bits as he (she?) takes on odd jobs and gets into all sorts of trouble to balance out the gameplay. Where the game really shines, however, is in the boss battles. This is a huge game generously laden with massive, malformed demons, both within and at the end of each mission. And the designers have left nothing to chance; the camera automatically locks on to each fiend, making the often lengthy battles all the juicier, reminiscent of Zelda only on a much more demonic scale. The CG is also exceptional, depicting the horror of body parts fusing into place under Hyakkimaru's flesh as he reclaims them piece by piece—an eye here, a spine or esophagus there... This guy makes cosmetic surgery look like a hangnail.

Blood Will Tell is still a little rough around the edges as certain missions drag on a bit with incidentals better left on the cutting room floor, but, on the whole, I'd have to say it's Sega's best original PS2 offering to date. There's a brand here for sure; the only trick is how to make the American public bite. GTA this ain't. Hope this helps. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Red Company
Publisher: Sega
Available: October

> "This is a huge game generously laden with massive, malformed demons..."

Donning his prosthetics, Hyakkimaru can wield assorted blades, but none so lethal as the ones fused to his bones.

Fable
Have it your way

L ike Sudeki, Fable will go to the development wire and then be whisked into waiting cases just days after going gold, hitting shelves before the team wakes up from a much-needed slumber. Translation: the review is gonna be late, so we figured a last bit of insight from lead designer Dene Carter might be the next best thing. Unlike Sudeki, there is little left to chance in the case of Fable. We've played enough to know that the worst that could happen is for it to be great instead of really f---ing great. So envision a really high grade and read on. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Big Blue Box
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: September

5 Questions
Dean Carter, Lead Designer, Big Blue Box

play: You've endeavored to create the quintessential player-evolved gamescape. Is creating a game like Fable essentially like making many games on the same engine?
Dene Carter: In some ways, this is true. Fable consists of a number of seemingly disparate elements: the simulator, the general "world of danger" and the story. Each of these required different skills from the team members involved, and even their own test-worlds.

The creation of Fable was peculiar in that our aim was not so much to create a standard single-player story-based game as to create a world filled with opportunities for players to express themselves.

Do the difficulty and/or gameplay vary greatly depending on the path players choose?
Bar the obvious fact that many main missions involve a lot of action, a lot of the gameplay involves you playing with the game-world and deciding who you want to be. I believe most people toy with the other NPCs in the game for at least the same amount of time as making their way through the storyline.

Personally, I find myself starting a play session with an obscure aim in mind: "Today I want to make someone's husband really jealous," or something similarly silly. Before I know it, a couple of hours have gone by and I've found myself in a ridiculous situation. Yay!

To fully reap the game's rewards, how many passes do you feel are required?
This very much depends on how you play. If you are an absolute obsessive and you flip-flop between moralities all the time, you can see quite a lot relatively quickly, but even then you will keep finding new things. We certainly are. However, most people like to play a specific character; they have an image of who they want to become and play in an appropriate style. This somewhat limits what you can see in one sitting—but then, temptation is what this game is all about!

What is the team most proud of about Fable? What do you really hope people take away from the experience?
We've all beavered away at our own parts of the game for a very long time indeed now. This has meant that, until recently, many people on the team hadn't actually looked at the game as a whole.

I think the thing that most delighted the team was that the game constantly surprised them—the interactions, the villagers' dialogue and reactions, the odd situations they found themselves in and so on. I've never seen a game where people laugh so much at the results of a play session and discuss how they got themselves into various scrapes. In most games it's, "Hey…you see how that dude got shot? Dude…it was like, dude. Bang…um…(long pause)…got any munchies?" In ours, we hear: "Oh for &*$ck's sake! My $%^&ing wife got picked off by guards during a burglary attempt! B^%tards!"

What was your biggest challenge or obstacle?
Apart from taking a very ambitious concept and squishing it into something that would fit on a console (even a super-powerhouse like the Xbox) within a finite time frame? I think the biggest hurdle was self-created when we tried throwing away everything we knew about every other RPG out there. For example, in most RPGs, you wander the world pilfering from everyone's house while they look on dumbly. Try smashing a barrel outside a pub in Fable, and you'll find you've annoyed a lot of people (including the barrel's owner). We also wanted people to play Fable pretty much any way they liked. The strain of balancing every spell, every weapon (ranged and melee), every creature, every AI behavior so that the player wasn't penalized for wanting to play in a particular manner was enormous.

Ben Huskins and Josh Atkins did a fantastic job on the balance, and the result is that I've never really seen two players play the same way—they all have their favorite weapons, spells and particular tricks. And isn't that what Fable's all about?

Sounds really f---ing great!

> **"I've never seen a game where people laugh so much at the results of a play session…"** *Dene Carter, lead designer, Big Blue Box*

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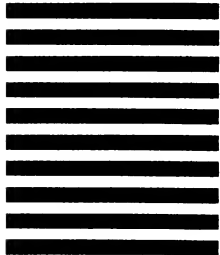
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Jak 3

The end of an era...perhaps

So far, 2004 has been an eye-opening year to say the least. It seemed as though the year's milestones were neatly pre-determined with Ninja Gaiden, Doom III and Halo 2 poised and waiting to take their spots among the year's best-of lists—benchmarks we saw coming from miles away. But as it turns out, there were other 800-pound gorillas in our midst—games that we knew would be great but never expected would aspire beyond their respective expectations, like The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay, Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders and now Jak 3, this being perhaps the most shocking revelation of all.

Jak II was a great game. Taking the ever-popular GTA model and applying it to a platforming universe was brilliant, if not a teensy bit flawed, riding on too much city and not enough action. With Jak 3 poised to come out just a year later, the best I hoped for was a slightly better take on the premise, but what I've been met with is total refinement. Jak 3 packs so much borderline euphoric fun into the first few hours of the game, you feel like you're playing the pull-out-all-the-stops last few pay-off levels normally reserved for the end...meaning it's either going to end up being short, flatten out...or go down as one of the greatest games ever made. To find out which, we went right to the source. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony
Available: October

> "We let the flow of the plot and the experience that we want to provide the player dictate the kind of gameplay that each mission will include."

Interview
Evan Wells, design director, Naughty Dog

play: Okay, so did you guys take a collective hardcore gamer DNA sample before embarking on this sequel? Because you throw more cool stuff our way in the first five hours than Jak II did in the whole game...
Evan Wells: Actually, we did...a little-known fact about Naughty Dog is that aside from making games, we also have a top-secret, state-of-the-art genetic research program in development.

I was stoked just to hop on a Leaper early on...next thing I know I'm in a dune buggy, then I'm platforming (bouncing) in a much cooler one (this is too fun, by the way; shame on you) and then just when I'm looking for the platforming...I'm staring up at a massive cylindrical structure covered in platforms. Does this keep up throughout the entire game? Is Jak 3 as big as Jak II?
Jak 3 is every bit as big as Jak II, and the variety of gameplay we've managed to put together is something we're very proud of. We try not to limit ourselves in the design of the game by repeating the same game mechanics over and over again. We let the flow of the plot and the experience that we want to provide the player dictate the kind of gameplay that each mission will include. Naughty Dog is fortunate enough to have a programming staff that is willing and able to support such variety in the game design.

Many a developer incorporates gliding, racing and other extreme elements into their games these days, but none do it to this extent. You nail the physics and gameplay in every single area as if it was its own game. Someone plays a lot of Smuggler's Run...Pilotwings? You seem inspired by so many great games.
Naughty Dog draws inspiration for its games from all kinds of entertainment, like movies, books, comics, anime, manga, as well as other games. For Jak 3, we took our inspiration from movies like *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior*, and a variety of games that feature some of the dozens of vehicles we wanted to include in our game. Even some old, classic arcade games were used as benchmarks to achieve the feel and control of our vehicles.

You've taken this franchise far beyond the confines of any single genre, into the realm of a complete autonomy. Jak 3 feels like a cross between a Heavy Metal magazine serial and a hybrid video game of biblical proportions. How daunting a task is it to button up a game of this magnitude?
Tuning, balancing and debugging a game of this size is quite challenging. The sheer number of options that the player has at any point in the game is staggering, and we have to make sure that they all work with each other and are fun. The total amount of real estate in the game also makes it difficult to debug. Every square meter of the game must be pored over to make sure that it is bug-free and polished to perfection. And with a Wasteland that is more than five times bigger than Haven City from Jak II, you can imagine how much time that takes.

The way you've designed the world, it has a significantly natural-feeling topography. You must have worked

He rides, glides, races, shoots, platforms, interacts... and just plain rules in every way. Jak 3 is the pinnacle of action games for its time.

painfully hard at giving it a handmade/random look? What about your cliff faces? They appear to be formed of many separate pieces. Are they, or is it just a simplistic pattern with great texture work?

Building the art assets that go into a game like Jak 3 is by no means an easy task, and we've been able to squeeze it into a year this time! Our artists are extremely talented and technically minded. They have to work with about a half-dozen different types of renderers, each with its own particular set of rules. The backgrounds are built out of instanced pieces of geometry that the engine has been optimized to draw thousands of very quickly. This is how the intricate look of the cliffs is achieved.

And the details…circular burn marks from gun blasts, dust blowing off ledges in the towns, sandstorms that slowly thicken…I even noticed collision on exploded dune buggy parts as I rolled over them. Do you people ever sleep?

No. But we do continue to bathe regularly.

One thing though: Daxter. Every time I start to feel that dark sense of adventure—music is low…things are all fantastical and trippy—he snaps the mood. Ever think about chilling him out or changing him back and plugging him into mission control or something? Is there, like, a Daxter contingent? I like his new gameplay, and he is funny, but sometimes he's like a broken record reminding me what I'm doing. That second confrontation with Ashlin (in the sandstorm), he totally hogged the moment. My guess is that you guys have a reason for all of this down the line…

Daxter is obviously an extremely important part of Jak's universe and shouldn't be discounted just because his name was dropped from the title. Everyone still knows who the star is! Daxter has a much larger playable role this time around, and he's also the center of the trilogy's biggest plot twist ever!

I knew it. Speaking of Ashlin, there seems to be a much larger cast in this game. Does the story this time have more layers and twists? I'm less than 10 hours in and it
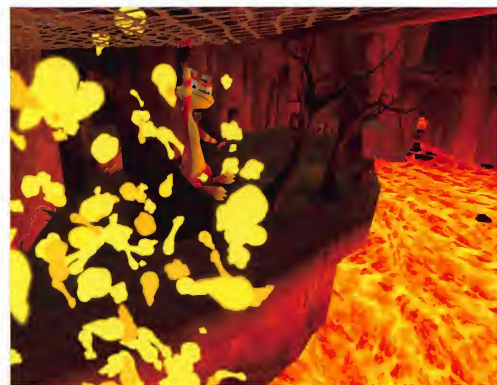
Jak doesn't just get mad…he gets all Dark Eco mad.

seems to be heading in that direction.

Jak 3 is the conclusion of the trilogy, which was started with Jak and Daxter: The Precursor Legacy. It isn't the end of the franchise, but it does wrap up many of the mysteries and questions that have been posed in the first two games. Players will discover answers about Jak's past and who the Precursors really are!

Of course, the engine is from on high, but there is a tiny amount of tearing when you spin the camera…is that the virtual limit being pushed?

Our programmers are always trying to squeeze more and more performance out of the PlayStation 2, and amazingly continue to find ways to do it. With the introduction of new technologies like rag-doll physics, cloth dynamics and bump mapping, occasionally a small amount of tearing may be visible. However, we continue to optimize in attempt to minimize this artifact.

If this is the final chapter in the Jak saga, all I can say is it seems like you're going out on a high note that could blow out windows. To be honest, I don't need graphics any better than this. I mean, I'll take them, but this game is pretty much heaven. I won't ask what you'll do on PS3 or what you think the next round will bring because I know you'll take the Fifth. All I ask is that you keep making real games for real gamers like this one.

It's really gratifying to hear that from such a hardcore gamer. It makes this gamer (and all of the gamers at Naughty Dog) feel good about the hard work put into making Jak 3. **play**

Tak 2

The Power of Dreams

Pupununu pride pervades profusely

When was the last time you slid behind the driver's seat of a 4X4 catapult to eradicate killer tentacles and perform some serious platforming? Or heaved a small, mutated village elder at vermin to have them do your bidding? Thus is the joy of fantastical game creation. There are lots of games where you shoot and fight and drive, but to truly lose yourself in a video game you need to get a little jiggy. Tak 2: The Staff of Dreams gets very jiggy. Steeped in Mother Nature (if she was to go completely insane), Tak once again takes jungle boogying to new heights, recruiting Jujus (super freaky gods) and all-new spirit animals (otherworldly guides to help him negotiate the spectral plane) to save the Pupununu people. Cartoon surreal is alive and well and living in, of all places, Utah. Here's my interview with the responsible party...
Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Avalanche
Publisher: THQ
Available: October

Interview

Troy Leavitt, designer and project manager, Avalanche Software

play: How did Tak come to pass? Did Nick pitch THQ or did you pitch THQ or Nick? Who birthed this crazy world?
Troy Leavitt: The origins of Tak are interesting. The seminal concept all began with a dream that [Avalanche] CEO John Blackburn had. In this dream, a young witch-doctor kid ran around inside a mysterious and magical world. John thought that his dream might be a good jumping-off point for a video game. He shared his idea with several others at the studio and the design began taking shape.

After several years of refinement, Avalanche finally pitched the idea successfully to THQ and Nickelodeon as the first new IP in the two companies' "game first" agreement. This meant that not only did we have a leading publisher for our video game, but the potential to bring Tak to other media through Nickelodeon!

Wow, so Tak actually was a dream sequence. The original featured buckets of exploration, while 2 seems like a much more linear trek, focused squarely on gameplay within the levels themselves. Natural progression or reactionary?
It is more of a natural progression. Tak 2 has a more clearly defined story and it is easier to tell a story if the levels happen sequentially. Don't worry; you'll still have plenty of opportunities for exploration within many of the large levels. The linear layout of the levels in Tak 2 eliminates those long moments of backtracking through an area you've already

completed without detracting from the fun of exploring someplace new.

I suppose with Jibolba on board, there's no need for Tak's village either. How did he become a bug? Can you let us in on the new story?
The original idea for Jibolba to become a flea came via a suggestion from Nickelodeon. We thought about it and realized that having Jibolba in flea form made him a perfect traveling companion for Tak. So now Jibolba is along for the ride and available to give Tak hints and advice as he journeys across the landscape. Plus, Tak can throw Jibolba at some of the animals and get them to perform some special actions via a well-placed bite!

I don't want to give away too much of the story, but here's what I can tell you. Tak begins having strange dreams where he is visited by a mysterious Dream Juju, who tells him that he must rescue a fair princess who is trapped within the Dreamworld. Although Tak is reluctant at first, he agrees to the quest.

When Tak awakes, he tells Jibolba about his strange dream. Jibolba, in turn, thinks that this could be very important. And so Tak, together with his aging but wise companion, sets off towards Jibolba's brother's place, who is an expert in the world of dreams. During their journey, Tak meets and interacts with several new animals, including bears, boars, beavers and frogs. He faces new enemies, from animated wooden men to otherworldly nightmare

Meet the new Tak. Better than he was before—better...stronger...faster.

> "...from time to time, we like to surprise the player by doing something a little unconventional."

Troy Leavitt
designer and project manager, Avalanche Software

creatures that appear to be composed of nothing more than the stuff of dreams. And, as before, he learns to trust in the strange and wonderful powers of the Juju spirits to guide and protect him.

Along the way, Tak discovers that not everything is as it seems. The threat to his people is far more devious and dangerous than he could have imagined. Only by summoning ancient powers, including the power to transform into animal form, can Tak have any chance of defeating this new danger. Tak soon learns that his role in the great Prophecy of the Pupununu People isn't over. Rather, it has only just begun!

How about that amazing CG quality from the original? Was it done in-house? Is it back?
Yes! We have many more cinematics in Tak 2 than in the original game. In fact, the new animated sequences look really good and are even funnier and more entertaining than in the first game. All of them were done in-house by our cinematics and animation team. Not to boast, but we think that Tak 2 has some of the best CG scenes available in any platform game!

My build was still pretty early. What can you tell us about Spirit Animals?
About midway through the story, Tak gets the opportunity to choose one of four different Spirit Animals: Dragon, Eagle, Jaguar or Piranha. Depending upon which one Tak selects, all give Tak a unique magical attack and permanently change Tak's costume.

The story behind this is that things are really getting serious and consequently Tak needs some more power to be able to face the challenges ahead of him. In order to find out just how serious, you'll have to play the game!

That can be arranged. I'm loving the Woodies too...way more than those purple Gremlin whack-a-doos from the first game. They seem pretty peeved at Tak though. How do they factor in to the big picture? Are they a key element or just stuff to whack?
We actually have a reasonably well-developed backstory behind the Woodies and why they are the continual menace that they are. You'll see glimpses of it in the game, but the basic gist is that they are renegade wood spirits who trap animals for their own purposes. Tak will frequently need to rescue animals that have been trapped by the Woodies. Plus, with the chunky wood noise they make when broken, they are really satisfying to smack around!

Seems to be quite a bit more Jujus now too. How many in all?
Depending upon how you count them, there are nine or ten Jujus in the game. I say "depending upon how you count them" because of a particular story element that is revealed along the way.

And you guys have really outdone yourselves on the character designs and graphics...
Most of the look of Tak comes from our lead concept artist, Todd Harris. He, together with art director Jeff Bunker, provides the primary thrust of what the world of Tak looks like. They have a pretty clear vision of how the game should look and, although I'm certain that they've been influenced by various other artists, the character and environment design is all original.

The Tak engine is fantastic. Is this proprietary technology? On which platform is it most efficient?
The Tak engine was developed entirely in-house. Although there are some differences between the various platforms as dictated by the hardware specifications of each console, the game looks great and plays well on any of them. Development is done cross-platform and is mostly simultaneous. Tak 2 will be released on the PS2, GameCube and the Xbox all at the same time.

Will we see a marked difference between the three consoles? Will any run at 60?
The differences between the consoles are almost entirely hardware dependent, and we push all of them pretty much to their limits in places. We always have the goal of running

at 60 frames, but the look and the playability of the game comes first. The technology is a tool that serves to create the experience and we don't let ourselves get hung up on it too much. The gameplay is the thing!

...And it seems even more action/puzzle-laden, but in a great way—using animals to solve environmental quandaries. Does this theme run throughout the game?
In the first half of the game, we intermix combat with animal-related puzzles. Later on, once Tak gains the ability to transform into some of the animals, the focus of the puzzles shifts a little, but the blend between the two elements remains constant. For example, you'll play one level with a puzzle focus followed by the next with a combat focus. We think that the variety of gameplay helps to keep things feeling fresh all the way through.

I've never done any platforming driving a catapult... Your catapult siege scene was a definite highlight. Is there more than one? And how about that background!?
We end up using the catapult mechanic in several places in the game. The first time, Tak gets to mow through a dream sequence, but it proved to be too much fun to only use once. There's just something satisfying about using a big old catapult to smash through walls and barriers!

I haven't fought any yet, but I assume Tak will fight some nasty bosses. Are they of the larger or craftier variety (or both)?
Absolutely! Tak 2 has several boss fights, including one where we parody the notion of what a boss fight traditionally is. We are very much aware of the conventions of the platforming genre and, from time to time, we like to surprise the player by doing something a little unconventional. You'll certainly see this at several points in Tak 2.

Can't wait to play the final. This one as big as the first?
We think that the play-through time will be comparable to the first Tak, but because of the story elements and more linear sequence of levels, Tak 2 will be much richer. Beyond that, we have a whole additional area of the game where you can play some extra games either by yourself or in competition against a friend. These "Dinky Games" (so called because they are hosted by the Dinky Juju from Tak 1) aren't part of the main storyline of the game, but we've included them as an added bonus just for extra replay and fun. **play**

Blinx 2

Masters of Time & Space

Move over, Bubsy!

I had my doubts about Blinx's second, more "user friendly" life, but, having finally played it, I'm now a true believer. That Naoto Ohshima was able to appease his many detractors while creating a sequel even more appealing to his hardcore fan base is a testament to his fervent desire to please. This is a man whose greatest reward is the pleasure his games bring, and he intends to leave no man or woman behind. Beyond the "Locker Room," which houses the most comprehensive critter creation ever (and your character shows up in the cinemas—a brilliant touch), Blinx 2 opens with extensive training and then drops us into a paradoxical universe, ruled by time-keeping cats, that runs the gameplay gamut from platforming to shooting to stealth to the new, streamlined time-control techniques, now tweaked for maximum pleasure; this game manufactures fun. Where the first Blinx was a complex, timed, brain-twisting action affair, the second game takes the fun, and just the fun, and plugs

it into a more open, free gamescape that allows seasoned gamers to play with the precision they know and love from the first game—cleaning out the challenging bits of each level can prove quite hairy—while providing a much more user-friendly canvas for casual gamers to cut their kitty teeth on. I even like the Tom Tom Gang, which I was prepared to slice like prospective bacon; if you thought cats with vacuums were cool, wait until you get a load of pig stealth. The new *Matrix*-ish time maneuvers allotted to the cats are pretty neat too, and the two-player co-op may be the best 3D gaming has rendered to date. So, has one of the minds behind Sonic finally birthed the elusive critter brand MGS has been chasing since day one? Let's find out…

Dave Halverson

System: Xbox
Developer: Artoon
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: November

>> Interview
Naoto Ohshima, producer of Blinx 2

play: I thought the first Blinx was a great game. I loved all the complexity and expected the 10-minute time limits. That said, however, I'm not surprised it didn't catch on as big as it could have, since there's such a varied demographic these days. Blinx 2 seems geared towards a much wider audience, yet it's still packed with enough Ohshima trademarks to keep your old-school fans happy. How difficult was it to strike this balance?

Naoto Ohshima: I'm really honored that you liked the first Blinx. When we embarked on creating Blinx 2, one of my goals was to make sure that those who did like the first Blinx had fun with the sequel too. For every new challenge, there were numerous opinions, but we wanted to honor our original fans as well.

I have no self-awareness regarding my design trademarks, but I do know that when I design games, my concern is to make a game that has something innovative and that when one finishes playing, there's something that stays with you. In other words, rather than creating a solid game with no originality, I'd prefer to make something highly original even if it might be a little rough in spots.

We've taken on a lot of challenges in Blinx 2, but we're also striving to make a polished, solid game. We want the best of both worlds, so we've increased the size of the team, are working with a tight-knit crew who've all worked together before, added the main programmer from Blinx as a second game director, as well as extended the time in our schedule for game balancing to almost twice as long as the first Blinx.

At what point did you decide to let the Tom Tom Gang (pigs) in on the action? Was this something you'd been thinking about from the beginning?

From the moment there was even any talk of Takuya Matsumoto coming on as the

second game director, we had the pigs. From way back when we were making Blinx 1, Matsumoto had wanted to make a game about treasure-stealing pigs.

Is this your first time dabbling in stealth?

Yes. My previous experience with stealth was only as a gamer playing games. But it seems there are some game elements in stealth that are a bit reminiscent of the old 8-bit-era games.

You've worked a lot of really great cooperative play into the mix as well. How were you able to integrate so many new elements along with a bigger game in just two years?

For one, a lot of the core team from Blinx 1 is working on Blinx 2, which really helped improve efficiencies greatly. Also, adding additional staff to our team helped. We've also had the cooperation and support of a team at Microsoft. It's all these elements combined that has allowed us to finish this game in just two years.

How big is the Blinx team at Artoon? Do you work crazy hours from the beginning of a project or go full-throttle from day one?

Without including the sound team or the Microsoft staff working on the project, we have about 50 people working on the game. About two-thirds of those folks have been working full throttle on the project from day one.

It's interesting that you, being such a renowned designer in Japan, would create a game for a console that's much more prominent in the USA and UK. Are you drawn by the technology, or do you find that games like Blinx are more accepted in the USA than in Japan these days?

I have no intention of denying games that are directed and set in reality and focus on

"...rather than creating a solid game with no originality, I'd prefer to make something highly original even if it might be a little rough in spots."

Naoto Ohshima, producer, Blinx 2

The Tom-Tom Gang adds new dimensions to the Blinx pride.

human desires. In fact, I'd be interested someday in creating such a game; but I am interested in honoring the fun at the core of the platformer genre. These are games that are safely and easily accessible to anyone. These are the kinds of games a father could play together with his son.

When we met for our first hands-on, you alluded to how Blinx is like a cog in the gear works...an everyman's hero who happens to be a cat. But why a cat? Are you fond of them or just find that they make good video game fodder?
When I was thinking of what creature would be appropriate as the "spirit of time" or as the "keepers of time," I knew it'd have to be a creature that was very familiar while at the same time was mysterious. Cats are loved all over the world, yet can be perceived as scary too and they also have an uncanny ability to vanish just when you thought you knew where they were. And while cats are domesticated, they also maintain a sense of independence, and it's these very qualities that made the cat the perfect animal to represent the keepers of time.

These keepers of time know the value of time. These timekeepers are rooting for the humans who are doing their best to honor the preciousness of time. It's possible these creatures are among us, and, of course, while they are in our presence, they will toss off their boots and pretend to walk on all fours.

Er, okay... When you think about it though, we've got Wonderdog, Banjo, Bug, Sonic, Spyro, Conker, Billy Hatcher, Gex, TMNT, Sparkster and I vaguely remember a short-lived kangaroo game (not counting the possum, squirrel and other vermin games we're still trying to forget)... Do you feel it's taboo to have more than one game of the same species? We're running low.
I don't know what the others on the team think, but I personally don't believe there's really any kind of taboo against having more than one game of the same species. I just know that it'd be great if when

people thought of the most famous game character cat, they thought of Blinx.

Well, Doraemon is fat and blue, so I think you're safe...although Bubsy had a nice run at it until 3D came along and nixed his remaining six lives. I love the create-a-cat/pig aspect of the game, which I wasn't sure I would; but you've made it so deep and personal. Does this level of character creation freedom create any problems in the game world?
I'm glad you like the create-a-cat/pig aspect of the game. I actually like it a lot myself. That's because I can choose the form and make a character that is unique for me. And not only do I play the game with the character I got to create; this character also appears in some of the in-game event movies, which pleases me even more. As for possible problems in the game, we took care of all of that, so there's no need to worry.

How have you, as a designer, changed since the advent of 3D? And where do you see yourself going as consoles teeter on the brink of realism? Will you continue to make games like Blinx, only with photo-real fur, environments and physics, or do you see actual game design evolving in the future?
To be honest, I really don't know where console (platform) games are heading. And whether or not realism is the only direction to go has yet to be determined. The visuals of a game are like art, and for all we know, we could find oil painting-style graphics in the games of the future.

Ah ha! See, you do know!
Twenty years from now, games will probably still exist, but they will probably be nothing that we can even imagine now.

True. Here's to many more litters of Blinx in the meantime. Congratulations on another wonderful game.
Thanks. We're still working hard on game balancing, trying to make sure Blinx 2 will be a great game. **play**
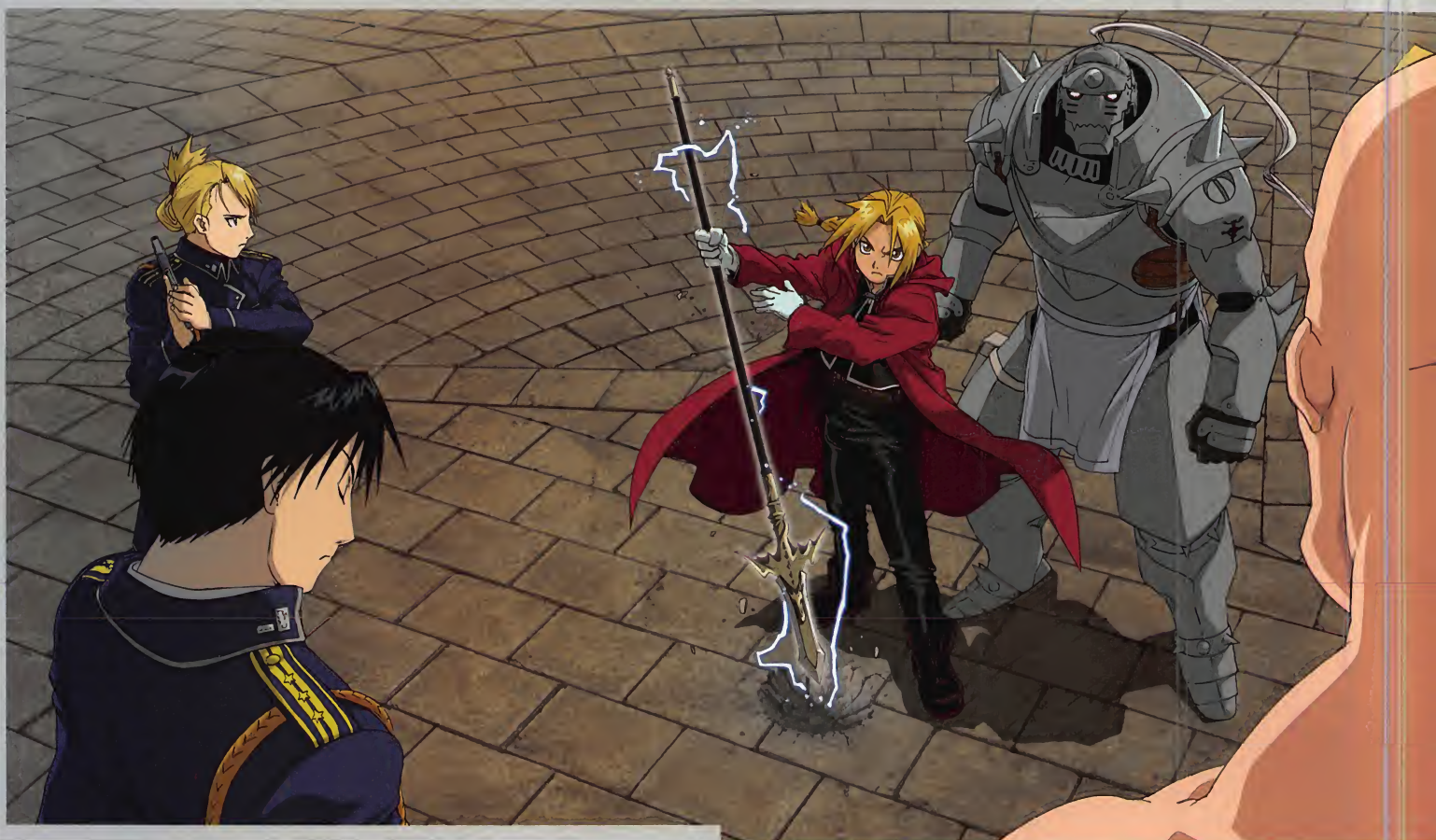
Fullmetal Alchemist
and the Broken Angel

An eye for an eye...

In alchemy, the science of understanding the structure of nature, in order to gain something, an equal price must be paid—a detail that Edward and Alphonse Elrich failed to take into account when they attempted human transmutation (aka resurrection) on their dead mother. Edward ended up with two fewer appendages and was forced to transmit his little brother's soul (whose physical form completely dissolved) into the only nearby vessel at the time, a bulky suit of powder-blue armor. Fast forward a few years and the brothers, now apparently comfortable in their new skins—Ed's been fitted with cybernetic (or "automail") limbs, and Alphonse seems right at home as a roaming hunk of tin—are working for the government as State Alchemists on a pilgrimage to a place called Central City to obtain the Philosopher's Stone, the key element needed to return them to their former selves. Standing between them and the prize are hordes of "Chimera" and the civic pandemonium they leave in their wake. Monstrosities created by dark alchemy—someone is busy churning them out like bad reality shows, ravaging villages and throwing up roadblocks for the brothers at every turn.

Fullmetal Alchemist is a true-blue Japanese action-RPG, a rarity among modern gaming, enveloped in a constantly unfolding story coursing through bouts of almost constant confrontation...a very unique brand of confrontation that keeps an otherwise dated-looking game from the throes of mediocrity. There's no fancy engine at work here—no ultra-sophisticated techniques, no motion capture or sick AI—just anime-style cutscenes, a truly commendable English translation (this game's English *translation* is better written than story-driven games made here), the kind of contagious personality the Japanese are famous for, and alchemy...lots and lots of alchemy. Edward begins with three basic forms of offense—two alchemic and one not—and he can call upon Alphonse to guard him or tackle opponents. The real trick, however—and the nucleus of the game—is his ability to transform just about anything in the immediate vicinity into a weapon of some kind. By highlighting street lamps, trash bins, old tires, signage, etc., Ed can convert them into lances, projectile weapons, gun turrets, decoys, bombs, mines and so forth—a play mechanic Racjin has done an amazing job integrating into the game, specifically tuning the alchemy to each unique environment and enemy type, like elaborate sets where the props become the weapons. Alchemy is also utilized as the catalyst to unlock puzzles and as a means to dispose of the game's increasingly cunning bosses.

Fullmetal Alchemist is the kind of game that gets under your skin in a hurry and keeps you playing until the wee hours. Typical Square Enix: even when the graphics aren't quite cutting edge, the gameplay swoops in to save the day. Always with the quality...
Dave Halverson

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Racjin Co., Ltd.
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: October

Fullmetal Alchemist: The Anime

Tired of loving a series and then having to wait forever (*cough* *Trigun*) for either the game or anime (depending on which comes first) to show up? There will be no such purgatory for Fullmetal Alchemist fans, as its freak flag is set to fly in joyful unison with FUNimation on board to unleash 52 episodes on DVD and Cartoon Network set to neuter it for TV (can they show bloody stumps on the Swim?) at around the same time as the game. The anime being the catalyst for the game, expect a lot more character development and story arcs (the game is like a snapshot of the anime), along with the same unsettling amalgam of horror and humor. In the anime, opposed to the game, we're greeted with the full visual accounting of Edward and Alphonse's brush with the other side as they attempt human transmutation to resurrect their dead mother, resulting in the rather unsettling sight of a young boy traumatized by the loss of an arm, a leg and now a brother—on top of his mother's death. We get an inkling of this in the game, but never actually see the carnage. Part of what makes anime so much fun is the ability to drive segues through a story like a Mack truck, and *Fullmetal* puts the pedal to the metal. Ten minutes later, we're laughing at short jokes (at Ed's expense) and a kid whose soul has been exiled to a suit of armor, so you see where this is going. Make no bones about it: *Fullmetal Alchemist* is dark; it just doesn't take itself too seriously. It'll be interesting to see how Cartoon Network handles some of the more sadistic content.

   Fullmetal is a great-looking show, with a hot button for action in the alchemy that acts like a blank check for the creators' imaginations. It's one of the year's most anticipated action-RPGs and anime for good reason. Let's all collectively hope that FUNimation doesn't make us wait too long between volumes. **Dave Halverson**
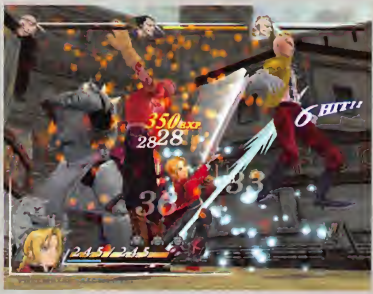
> "The real trick, however—and the nucleus of the game—is his ability to transform just about anything in the immediate vicinity into a weapon of some kind."

Not the sort of thing you want chasing you...

Psychonauts

Can you say wormhole? Tim Schafer and his Double Fine cohorts are back in business, finishing up what could very well become the next benchmark in adventure platforming. We've been screaming for a platforming star that aims to please teen and beyond, and Raz certainly has a head big enough for the crown. Speaking of heads, that's where Raz does his best work, using his paranormal powers to get to the root of the problem, by diving directly into other people's minds. And speaking of minds, Tim Schafer's (Grim Fandango, Full Throttle) was made to blow ours. Hard to believe MGS took a pass. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Double Fine Productions Inc.
Publisher: Majesco
Available: Q1 2005

ATV 3 Offroad Fury 3

Apparently two first-rate first-party ATV games aren't enough for a single console, and so SCEA is set to release yet another. But this one won't be born under the Rainbow, with development honors going instead to the Climax team responsible for Acclaim's ATV line, Quad Power Racing, of which there are also two. So, why do we need this game again? Sure it's filled with all of the requisite modes and thrash-metal tuneage, but we have two Rainbow games. I love the first-person camera, but enough to log onto a fifth ATV game? Hmmm…Sony, make me a believer! **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Climax
Publisher: Sony
Available: Q4

Guilty Gear Isuka

Guilty Gear Isuka takes the series' technical precision and graphical beauty and brings it to the next level—that of four-player mayhem. While the core Guilty Gear gameplay remains intact, you'll have to learn to fight in an all-new way as enemies come from all sides, leading to even more manic action than in previous GG games. Aside from the primary arcade mode, Isuka also features GG Boost mode, transforming the game into a classically styled side-scrolling beat 'em up, along with a Robo Ky mode, where you can customize your own fighter. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Arc Sysmte Works
Publisher: Sammy
Available: November
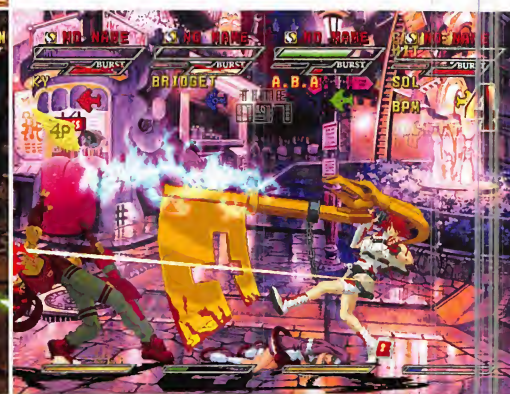
Killzone

The comparisons to Halo elude me—yeah, they're both first-person shooters with a sci-fi edge—but on its own terms, Killzone is what the PS2 hasn't had in a while: a memorable offering in a very crowded genre. The game looks fantastic, boasting some very cool environments that carry quite the unique look and feel. Now that the game is closer to completion, there's evidence that this one's gonna shine, especially with the staunch AI. And since no one seems to let online absences slide, the designers have done a lot to bump up the network play with 16-player battles. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Guerilla
Publisher: Sony
Available: October

Resident Evil 4

Although Capcom is still keeping much of Resident Evil 4 under wraps, additional play time with the game only further cements what we already knew—RE4 is more action-packed, more frightening, and unlike any previous game in the series. The smarter non-zombie enemies instill fear not only through their gruesome looks but via their smarter actions, while the new over-the-shoulder camera only adds to the tension. One additional detail that's been revealed is the character of Luis (apparently Johnny Depp's clone), but his exact role in Leon's quest for the President's daughter, Ashley, is still subject to debate. **CH**

System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: January 2005
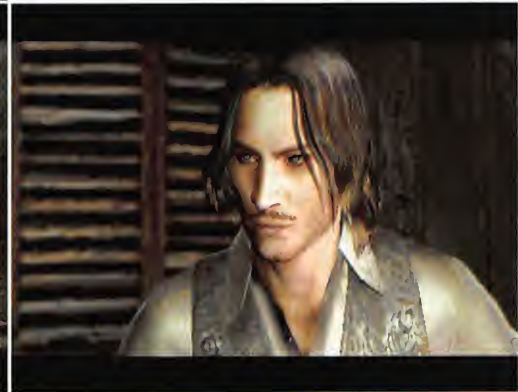
The Getaway: Black Monday

The first Getaway: good ideas, underdeveloped, a mess of a story, obviously ripe for a sequel. That sequel is called Black Monday, and it's instantly more accomplished than its ambitious predecessor. The setting is still London, with three new main characters converging around a centrally growing plot. A lot more attention is being given to the storytelling, and the cinematic presentation is getting bumped up as well. The whole thing looks quite a bit better, with animations and a cleaned-up driving engine showcasing the nice improvements. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Team Soho
Publisher: Sony
Available: February 2005

Champions: Return to Arms

Not a lot has changed since the original Champions of Norrath delivered the valuable goods early this year to the action-RPG category. Well, not the best parts, at least. The core of the game remains: you're still in the land of Everquest, hacking away at monsters in highly detailed, top-down settings, earning experience and treasured items. A shaman and a berserker are being added to the returning classes of characters, who can be transplanted from the original journey and newly upgraded in this more robust world. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Snowblind
Publisher: Sony
Available: Q1 2005

King Arthur

King Arthur is exactly what you'd expect from a developer close to the EA pride (Krome is the Aussie home of Ty Tiger) even though the game is being published by Konami. This here is pretty much pound for pound the *King Arthur* version of *Lord of the Rings,* with actual movie footage dissolving into gameplay that matches the movie scene for scene, divided among the marquee characters. The horse-play is especially well done, making up for the tedium of guarding carriages and the like, hacking away at wily invaders, and elements of archery and evasion are nicely integrated. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Krome
Publisher: Konami
Available: Q4

Tony Hawk's Underground 2

The man that parlayed skateboarding into an empire is back—well, at least his bank account is—with yet another surprisingly fresh offering. Mr. Hawk and Activision should send the team at Neversoft all courtesy Ferraris for their tireless dedication to this franchise, as they are set to deliver yet another high-concept, highly evolved rendition. Sign on for the newly honed controls; stay plugged in for the much-improved graphics and fantasy elements. Meanwhile, I'm still waiting for Skeleton Warriors 2. Hey! Skeletons on skateboards... **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: Neversoft
Publisher: Activision
Available: October

Mega Man X8

Mega Man X8 may be best thing to happen to the Blue Bomber since Mega Man 8. Wall jumping, dashing, dodging sadistic patterns, capping re-spawning baddies and fighting huge theme-based level guardians has seldom been this much fun. The engineers at Mega Man laboratories have taken things a step further with X8, incorporating seamless tag-team play, giving the levels added depth and providing a means for escape should you fall into the enemies' large robotic clutches via "Rescue Change," which sends your standby character (Zero or Axl) to the rescue. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: November

Karaoke Revolution Vol. 3

Konami's allowing no rest for our vocal cords. Aside from new characters, costumes and venues, Karaoke Revolution Vol. 3 features a two-mic duet mode just in case two people want to embarrass themselves simultaneously. Songs that lend themselves to co-op singing, such as Love Shack and I Got You Babe, feature prominently on the playlist, while hits such as My Immortal, Beat It and Oops!…I Did It Again ensure that the game will be substantially better than Vol. 2. An Xbox version of the original Karaoke Revolution is also in the works, featuring an expanded song list. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Konami
Available: November

Conker: Live & Reloaded
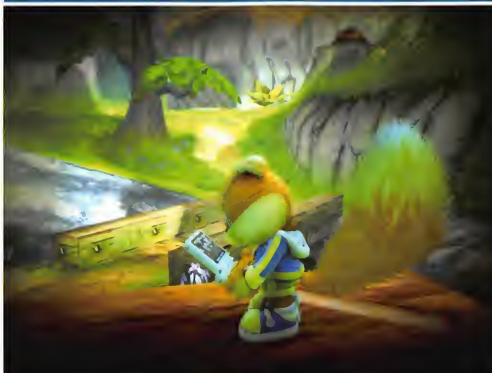
You'd think I'd have something profound to say to match these fur-tastic new Conker Live & Reloaded screens. But this is not the case. Having written an entire cover story on it just a few short months ago, there's little left to divulge except to say, "Wow, is it ever looking splendid. Do we need better graphics than this?" What's cooler is that with L&R, not only is Conker the most irreverant, rude, crude and just plain wrong game ever—filled with cute li'l creatures that drink, piss, barf and hurt each other—but now it's got the killer online mode too. I just wish I didn't have to wait for 2005 to play it. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Rare
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: 2005

Viewtiful Joe 2
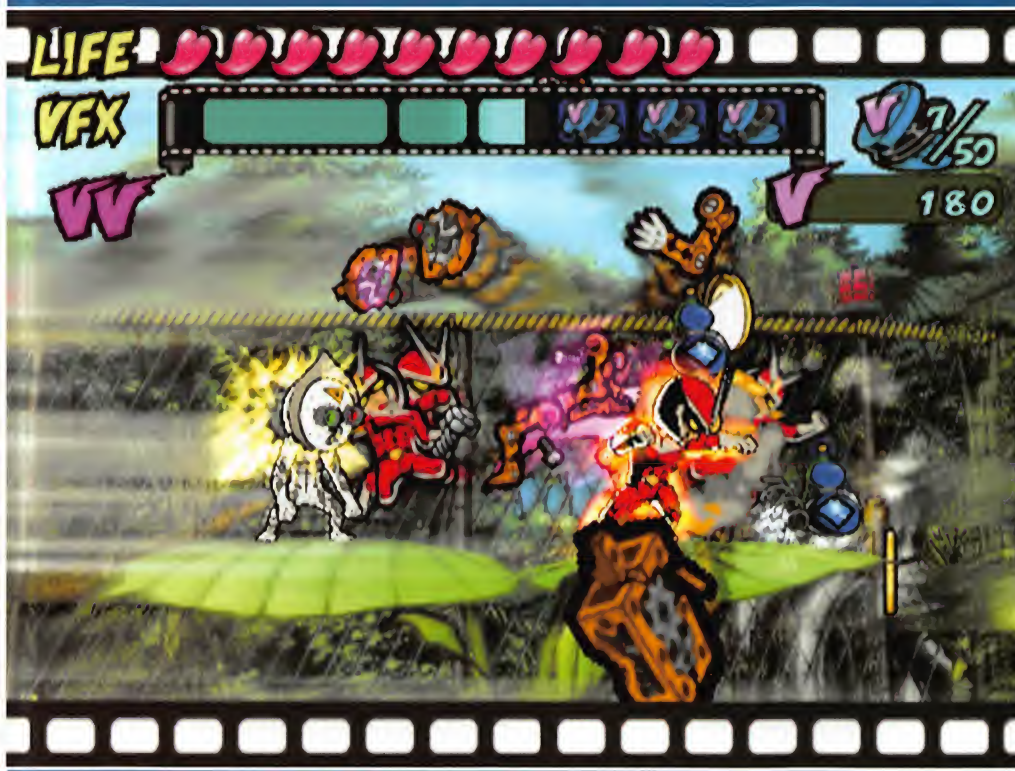
Having spent time with a more extensive, close-to-complete version of Viewtiful Joe 2, I'm pleased to report that this sequel is shaping up to be just as good as I could have anticipated. The puzzles seem to be even better integrated into the gameplay than in Joe's first outing, the game's wacky sense of humor is still fully intact, and massive, pattern-based, somewhat neurotic bosses (like a militant Tyrannosaur) add to the appeal. The new levels, including a trek though Egyptian pyramids and a nighttime romp through a Gotham-like city, provide great backdrops for the action. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Clover Studio
Publisher: Capcom
Available: November

Close Combat: First to Fight

Ever wanted to be a Marine? Me neither, but I'm certainly up to experiencing their brave intensity in a game. With input from the United States Marine Corps, the squad-based First to Fight actually features real marines in real combat situations; it's so grounded in actual scenarios that you can play it in sim mode and work around one-hit kills. One of the more original aspects of the game is a psychology tracker, which details your team's mental awareness. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Destineer
Publisher: Gathering of Developers
Available: November

TRON 2.0: Killer App

Chances are you know about the slew of Live refinements created for 2.0's Xbox launch (we listed them last issue), so we can concentrate on the porting of the excellent (on PC) core game. Much to my chagrin (I played through it on keyboard, and I hate keyboard), there's trouble in cyberspace. Given that, aside from the lighting and character models, TRON is fairly basic structure-wise, I'm shocked to find the Xbox version not only chugging, but the ancillary characters move like they're under a strobe light. This game should fly at 60 fps and have perfect animation. Anything less will be a huge letdown. **DH**

System: Xbox
Developer: Climax
Publisher: Disney Interactive
Available: October

Gran Turismo 4

I've been looking forward to Gran Turismo 4 so long, I feel like I've played it and am waiting for Gran Turismo 5 on PS3. But alas, I have only sampled the Prologue, and it won't be until November before I get my hands on the glorious final. In the meantime, information about GT4 continues to trickle out of Sony and Polyphony Digital, and the latest shows off the game's new snow courses. This should prove to be an awesome showcase of the game's advanced physics. **Michael Hobbs**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Polyphony Digital
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

Gungrave
Overdose

Brandon turns up the Heat

What a wonderful world it would be if all the games of mass destruction were 15 bucks. Not because they suck, but to make like Ron Popeil and spread the word. "Not 30 dollars…or 25 dollars…you won't even pay 20 dollars for this great game…" Cue the stiffs clapping; game infomercials…they can't be that far off.

There's still a lot to be said about kicking ass, and OD is the brood's bloody poster child. While it may appear an overly straightforward button-mashing shooter at first glance, a closer look under the coffin lid reveals a nicely tactical undead adventure that marches to its own funeral dirge. The fallen heroes of Billion City have risen again to "Kick their ass" like a narc squad from hell, cleaning out the city's drug trade in a hail of steaming lead. Betrayed and ultimately murdered by his best friend, the game's lead—Beyond the Grave, aka Brandon Heat—is a lumbering ghoul short on dialogue but big on bringing the pain via Cerberus—twin handguns with the force of two small cannons—behind a quasi-unique set of play mechanics specifically tuned to perform under heavy fire. Charging and releasing the firing button causes a massive blast that triggers a "beat count," allowing you to unload upwards of 100 consecutive rounds, manifesting into raging orgasms of firepower called Demolition Shots. The more artfully you utilize Grave's skill set overall, the faster new Demolition Shots are rewarded until Grave's the next best thing to a walking nuclear bomb.

He can also whip the massive coffin chained to his back for close-in fighting, dive in any direction and deflect missile fire—an amalgam of pain that, given the onslaught all around him, will have your inner demon giggling like a lunatic. And the character and world design, from renowned *Trigun* creator Yasuhiro Nightow, screams to life in the game, picking up where the anime leaves off.

Overdose looks and plays great, the anime-style cinematics reek with personality, and there's a big, meaty bonus in the form of two new unlockable characters: Rocketbilly Cadillac and Kabane Juji. At 15 bucks, passing would be a grave mistake. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Red Company
Publisher: Mastiff
Available: September

"There's still a lot to be said about kicking ass, and OD is the brood's bloody poster child."

Rocketbilly Cadillac unloads some serious guitar licks.

Second Sight is the result of a group of huge talents who obviously love the craft of gamemaking. It has the energy of an old classic while existing in a superbly built modern shell. Fantastic little touches abound, adding up to a firmly cohesive, engagingly structured, marvelously imagined setting to explore.

The game begins in a research hospital, introducing us to amnesiac John Vattic. As you uncover clues to his infliction and the inevitable conspiracy within, a smart gameplay narrative unfolds in alternating stretches before and after his accident. It's a fun, clever setup that works well, surviving the here-we-go-again flat voice acting.

As one part stealth, one part action, the variety in the balanced gameplay is hugely welcome, and I never felt tied down to a rigid universe. There exists some of the lazy trial-and-error setups, but the designers have done an exemplary job of creating scenarios that are varied and tremendously entertaining: protecting an engineer as you split with an assault team to storm a compound; adventurously shimmying across ledges and opening an unencumbered path to guide an ill mental patient and partner to safety; sniping guards in a firefight that inventively boils over with tension.

The big focus of gameplay is your ability to call on psychic abilities, like healing, telekinesis, energy blasts and even a cloak. All are fun to use and critical for survival, but the highlight for me was using John's possession skills, where he projects an image of himself and runs to solve puzzles and command guards for an unsuspecting kill.

This is not the most technically sophisticated game, and there will be critics quick to point to the occasional missteps—which do very little to undermine a game that works on countless levels. Not the most detailed characters in the world, huh? No matter, especially when too many games more grounded in reality, more staunch with detail, are muddled and artistically bankrupt. Credit keen eyes for superbly animating, shading and designing such awesomely appealing, perfectly distinct characters and environments; the world here is just so creatively complete and effortlessly immersing against its broad strokes of fantasy. Second Sight is Free Radical's best, most ambitious work—a sign of greatness to come. **Brady Fiechter A-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Free Radical
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: September

Second Sight

The Time Splitters crew delivers a signature style and their best game yet

"...the world here is just so creatively complete and effortlessly immersing against its broad strokes of fantasy."

The tremendously emotive touches of animation on the characters give them life.

Mega Man X
Command Mission
Mega Man takes on a new role

As was its creators' intentions, Mega Man X Command Mission is indeed a refreshing break from the Mega Man norm. It's nice to charge into battle with a trio of Maverick Hunters at your command, unleash multi-hit chain combos and engage in a conflict that's more about long-term strategic planning than just quick reflexes—not only because the X series has stagnated lately, but because the Mega Man X universe lends itself well to the RPG genre. However, while the change of pace is appreciated, I feel that MMXCM still has a lot of unused potential.

On the plus side, the battle system is everything I could have hoped for. By combining turn-based combat with just a tad of real-time input, limited super-powered Hyper Modes and the nicely strategic Weapon Point meter (do you use it now for an extra hit or build it up for a super move?), Capcom has created a system that's deep as well as fun. The character designs and customization options also work well, successfully building upon familiar elements from previous MMX games.

If only the battles and good looks were enough to carry the entire adventure. As it is, there simply isn't enough to MMXCM. The game is far too linear, not only due to its mission-based structure, where a single dungeon-crawl basically serves as an entire chapter, but also to the rather straightforward levels themselves. X has a dash ability that's used for some evasive maneuvers and eventually light puzzle solving, but this is Mega Man; there could be so much more. If jumping had been included to add a third dimension to the exploration, or if, say, X could use his Buster to destroy certain objects (think Xenosaga), the game could have been so much richer. The game also relies, for the most part, on a single central hub with a lone row of shops that simply adds more powerful wares after each chapter is completed. Capcom can certainly make a great RPG—look no further than the classic Breath of Fire games for proof—but someone needs to incorporate the elements that made those titles such epics into the MMX universe.

Given that this is part of what's arguably the most prolific franchise ever, there's a good chance that a sequel is already in the works. If it is, I hope that these issues are promptly addressed. It would make all the difference between a game that's decent and a game that's great. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: September

"...while the change of pace is appreciated, I feel that MMXCM still has a lot of unused potential."

Enemies can be destroyed in an impressive explosive display with the Final Strike.

CRITICAL

X	LE 1234	WE 567	
ZERO	LE 7890	WE 234	
AXL	LE 3456	WE 456	

Crash
Twinsanity

Maudah-gaudah-goodigah!

The world's most (and only) famous bandicoot has turned an important corner. Instead of attempting to make a new version of someone else's game, Traveller's Tales has finally made Crash their own, stamping a big TT brand on his furry, orange butt. The pairing of Crash and arch rival Neo Cortex is the best action duo since Chaotix, introducing a heap of clever gameplay devices into a game that finds Crash as he should be—maniacally goofy with sweet moves and a mean double jump. In fact, Crash appears almost dangerously dimwitted this time out: aloof and a bit crazed—just the way I like him. The entire game is a riot. Cortex plays his best token evil villain, and Traveller's Tales plays the self-deprecating card with contagious abandon, matching wits with a wonderfully zany soundtrack that sounds like something Danny Elfman might have done fresh out of Oingo Boingo.

Cortex and Crash hook up after the newly thawed maniac's latest revenge plan goes awry, sending the two of them, locked in a ball of fisticuffs, hurling through an underground abyss, Marble Madness style, where they ultimately stumble across a couple of ETs bent on putting them both out of commission—hence the cease-fire. When the two are linked—via death grip on a shiny crystal shard—Cortex becomes Crash's instrument of pain. Crash can hurl him across caverns to obliterate infidels or throw switches, add circumference to his spin attack, or use his appropriately formed head as a mallet. When they're apart, cause and effect takes over…Crash being in charge of the cause part, with Cortex feeling the brunt of the effects whenever Crash chunks it. Either way, Cortex pretty much always gets the brown end of the stick. Traveller's Tales has also done away with the tired hub concept, opting for a world-type design via open environments linked by a network of subterranean caves, the sea and the always-entertaining floating platforms. You won't be running around with 20 lives in this one either. Between the game's action puzzles and stretches of platforming, seeing either Crash's or Aku Aku's face on a crate is a welcome sight indeed. Speaking of crates, they aren't just for smashing anymore. Traveller's Tales integrates them in an almost sadistic fashion. And don't look for any convenient cushions like invisible walls to keep you from falling. If it's got an edge, you can bail. Twinsanity requires you to play at the top of your game, and rewards you greatly for doing so.

Creating a gamer's game through and through, Traveller's Tales has delivered a 60 fps cartoon epic without sacrificing expanse, dwarfing boss encounters or vivid effects by skillfully balancing model and environment integrity with performance. The end result looks and feels derivative of 3D's inaugural 800-pound gorilla.

Dave Halverson B+

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Traveller's Tales
Publisher: VU Games
Available: September

Crash takes a ride on Cortex's backside. Payback time!

"The pairing of Crash and arch rival Neo Cortex is the best action duo since Chaotix..."

Pikmin 2

Will Captain Olimar ever get a decent break?

Captain Olimar is in trouble yet again. After his strange adventure with the Pikmin, he returns to his home planet only to find his employer up to his eyeballs in debt. With the help of his new partner Louie, Olimar must return to the strange alien world and collect enough treasure to pay off this debt.

So begins Pikmin 2, and lovers of the original will feel at home right away. Making and directing hordes of Pikmin and using their various abilities to collect items and traverse the world is as fun as ever, but there have been rather significant changes to the gameplay. One of these is the elimination of the 30-day time limit. In the first Pikmin, Olimar had 30 game days in which to find enough parts of his missing rocketship to return home. While Pikmin 2 is still built around the concept of days, you can take as many as you want hunting for treasure and exploring the world. This changes how you approach each day, as you now have the luxury, for example, of just spending time increasing your number of Pikmin or just looking at the nice scenery. The other significant change is the addition of the second controllable character, Louie. He does not differ from Olimar in the way he plays, he simply allows you to do a bit of multi-tasking as you can have two groups of Pikmin working concurrently. What's nice here is that you can use this ability as much or as little as you like (although there are instances where you must use both). It's quite fun finding the most efficient way of tackling puzzles, but you're also free to play in a manner more like the first game if you don't care to tax your brain in such a way. Also new is the addition of two Pikmin type. Basically, the purple ones are very heavy and strong and the white ones can find buried treasure and are immune to poison, one of the new environmental obstacles in the game. These new Pikmin cannot be harvested in the same way as the normal ones. Rather, you can only increase their numbers in new underground areas where time does not pass. Rounding out the changes is a new two-player split-screen battle mode in which you must attempt to steal your opponent's marble (or collect four yellow marbles) while harvesting Pikmin and fighting monsters. It's not the cooperative game that some might have hoped for, but it is a fun way for Pikmin lovers to engage in a bit of cute competition.

Obviously, a lot has changed in Pikmin 2, but the core appeal remains. It's such a refreshing and addictive game with all the charm, attention to detail, and top-quality design that I expect from Nintendo. This is a bigger and slightly more complex game than the first, and I can't say that I like it any better. There's something about the relative simplicity of the first one that might appeal to me more, but I certainly like everything they've added here in this great sequel.
Michael H Hobbs A-

System: GameCube
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: August

"Making and directing hordes of Pikmin and using their various abilities to collect items and traverse the world is as fun as ever..."

The all-new two-player mode offers players a chance to pit their Pikmin skills against one another.

OTOGI 2
Immortal Warriors

A thoroughly engaging, thoroughly Japanese action game you must play

Kill the six leaders, and the others will flee.

"To play the game is to fully understand the reach of its carefully orchestrated chaos."

The special effects shower the screen with every attack.

The excellent invention of wildly infectious gameplay and gorgeous visuals running through the original Otogi came as a big surprise in the hands of From Software and the Xbox. As a big fan, I've yet to play a game quite like it, and never expected anything else to even attempt a similar style of action and presentation. Guess the only imitator will be a gift from the same creators, the undeniably superior sequel, Otogi 2: Immortal Warriors.

In all its elegance and meticulous care, Otogi 2 could very easily be received by some as a minor masterwork. I feel that its core gameplay is more engaging than the mighty Ninja Gaiden, inferior only in that it's set up in disjointed sections without the gravity of an immersing, fuller world.

The action is sensationally fast, immediate and tremendously gratifying. Providing an additional five characters to join returning warrior Raiko in a quest to vanquish the awakened demons of the land, the destructive setup hasn't changed much, but the new allies add immeasurably to the complexity of the experience. They all feel appealingly different—marvel at how their outward design so keenly reflects their movement and flow. And while the core play is to chain enormous combos together with acrobatic juggles and skilled containment of the enemy, the approach of speed and sensitivity varies from hero to hero.

Otogi 2 rewards you with mass destruction. Part of the thrill is dashing atop massive temples and across ancient ships, through fiery caves and over ancient pools, attaining near flight, decimating every single structure in your path. To play the game is to fully understand the reach of its carefully orchestrated chaos.

A mesmerizing tone dominates the heavily Japanese landscape, built off a rich spirit of what feels like ancient folklore and mysticism. This translates—brilliantly, tangibly—into the connection with the combat and the control of the characters. There's nothing quite like Otogi 2: Immortal Warriors, and there probably will never be anything quite like it ever again. **Brady Fiechter**

Shadow Hearts
Covenant

Historical realism and peculiar fantasy yield a compelling RPG

Prepare for a journey into the bizarre—a journey into a world of horror and fantasy, filled with some of the most curious characters you'll ever encounter, yet grounded in early 20th century history and all built on the backbone of a distinctive combat system. Shadow Hearts: Covenant is an eccentric role-playing adventure to be sure, and one that's not for everybody, but those who accept its fiction will find that it's an RPG as rewarding as almost anything else that's out there.

Set six months after the first Shadow Hearts, the game begins set amidst the western front of World War I, as Germany is pushing forward with its invasion of France. Gritty, crisp, highly detailed environments, enhanced by superb lighting effects, set the eerie mood perfectly, delivering a breathtaking, sad beauty to the realistic villages, cathedrals, dungeons and forests encountered throughout the game. Karin Koenig, a stunning German officer with flaming red hair, seems set to be the game's protagonist, but Yuri Hyuga soon takes center stage as tumultuous events relating directly to his adventures in Shadow Hearts 1 begin to unfold. Horrific monsters that would seem perfectly at home in Silent Hill begin their assault, and a globe-spanning quest takes shape, pitting Yuri, Karin and company against a secret society and one of Europe's most notorious historical figures.

The atmosphere is ripe for a chilling horror RPG—and then the weirdness begins. A vampiric pro wrestling superhero? Talking wolves that wear hats? A gay subquest to find beefcake pictures? And, of course, the dress and speech of the main characters don't match with the rest of the era-based designs (although, on their own, the character designs are fantastic). It's all highly entertaining to be sure, and some levity is admittedly necessary, but it does sometimes feel out of place.

Some players may also need to come to grips with the unique ring-based battle system that is Shadow Hearts'

trademark. Although battles are turn- and menu-based, spinning Judgment Rings that emphasize skillful timing are the soul of all aspects of combat, from standard attacks to item use to magic spells. And the combat goes much deeper—between sanity points, combo assaults, character-specific abilities like tarot cards and monster fusions, magic crests, ring modification and more, there's an almost endless variety. At first it seems overwhelming, but a little practice and experimentation yields one of the more lively and interesting battle systems out there.

When added to great writing and amazing sound, including quality voice acting, the elements of Shadow Hearts: Covenant combine to form an eclectic, distinctly Japanese RPG mix that takes us to a place just beyond the fringes of our reality. If that's a place you want to go, your ride has arrived. **Chris Hoffman B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Aruze/Nautilus
Publisher: Midway
Available: September

This big dude looks tough now, but just wait until he changes forms...

"...an eclectic, distinctly Japanese RPG mix that takes us to a place just beyond the fringes of our reality."

Star Wars
Battlefront

Continuing the impressive streak of newly ambitious Star Wars games

Beguiling as it may be, there's no denying the exuberant charge a *Star Wars* game receives from fanfare alone. Cue the orchestrated theme music, toss in some Wookiees, Storm Troopers, clones and Jedi Knights—don't forget Darth Vader—paint the world on a canvas pulled from the films, and your game is now instantly a curiosity.

If only all developers were so lucky. In the high-flying-series-in-the-making Star Wars Battlefront, replacing the borrowed sights and sounds of the movies would inevitably produce a less effective experience; hell, merely having the iconic film series' cutscenes embellish a loose narrative makes it all that much better. But what is here is approached with high-energy, detailed skill and plenty of original pull, producing a large-scale action setup as fun as it is wonderfully *Star Wars*.

It may all appear a little complex at first: choose from a vast array of character types with all sorts of weapons and unique skills, issue a handful of commands to your surrounding allies as you assess the battlefield and pinpoint strategic assaults, work out a line of defense, jump into an assortment of vehicles and learn to smartly navigate the engaging terrain. But once you quickly lock in your push for victory, the high, fairly straight action quotient propels the gameplay into what amounts to a massive stage of firefights to capture enemy strongholds. If you're truly dominant with the kill, victory can also come down to simply wiping out the entire line of defense.

Some will balk at the limited modes of play; the game as a whole is a bit underdeveloped, and the single-player skirmishes do run light, but things truly heat up when you go online, warring in teams of eight on eight. With all the well-placed activity going on around you, nicely fleshing out a roaring, nostalgia-elevated stage of sci-fi chaos, coordinating with friends amongst the mess is terrific entertainment. **Brady Flechter** **B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Pandemic
Publisher: LucasArts
Available: September

"...merely having the iconic film series' cutscenes embellish a loose narrative makes it all that much better."

It feels way too cool stepping into the chaos of battlefields resembling the films.

Reviews

Game of the Month

>> Second Sight p 087

"It has the energy of an old classic while existing in a superbly built modern shell."

Also notice...

Shadow Hearts: Covenant
p 072

Great characters, fantastic visuals and a unique battle system make this dark yet quirky RPG sequel deeply fulfilling.

Pikmin 2
p 070

Captain Olimar returns to take control of the Pikmin with a little help from his friend Louie.
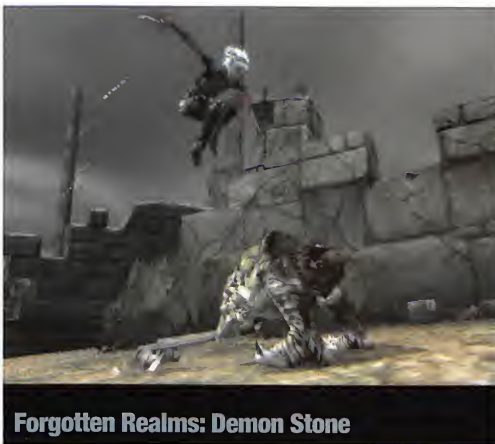
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone

I've been following Demon Stone for months now, watching it transform from a gorgeous looker with decent sword-and-magic hack-and-slash gameplay to a superbly complete D&D-based package. Few games out there match Demon Stone's artful visions, and the characters join the rich settings with excellent animation and designs that will thrill not only fans of fantasy, but anyone who can appreciate elegant, mythic creations. They're a blast to confront too, requiring an engaging level of creative teamwork as you enjoy the constant switch between the three heroes. A fully orchestrated score and top-shelf voice acting build the spirit even more. This is no Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King—no two player?—but certainly a cinematic success from the same mold. **Brady Fiechter B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Stormfront Studios
Publisher: Atari
Available: September

You don't have to be a fan of Forgotten Realms to appreciate the rich setting and excellent presentation.

Terminator 3: Redemption

Don't confuse this third-person action apocalypse with the awful first-person shooter, Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines. It's not so bad at all, if you don't demand much more than a shallow, acceptable diversion. Some of the bigger problems: it looks a lot better than it plays, orchestrating big scenes of chaos that don't hit you as propulsively as they should; Arnold, when blasting on foot, is clunky, disarming the intensity of the action; and it feels like you're constantly going through the same motions—although there are some really cool sequences. Combining three basic modes of incessant shooting, T3: Redemption is constantly up and down—I enjoyed the on-rails shootouts—but it finally ends up on the down. **Brady Fiechter C**

System: **PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube**
Developer: **Paradigm**
Publisher: **Atari**
Available: **September**

SRS: Street Racing Syndicate

The modding/hip-hop car culture movement is apparently so dope (I spoke hip-hop yo!) that Namco, home of Ridge Racer (I'm going to hell for playing this game, I just know it) has adopted a game dedicated to its trappings, cruising around a massive metropolis on a quest to fatten one's stack and hit on some "ladies" (the kind that would like you for owning a clown car) by winning various challenges, earning respect and tuning your car until you have to live in it. So if livin' la vida loca all over the mean and more often than not wet streets of a fictitious hip-hop city where the run-off basins are lined with plasma screens sounds like fun, you should be all over this. It's big, deep and dripping with rhymes. A few framerate hits aside, it looks good too, if not a bit excessively neon. **Dave Halverson B**

System: **PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube**
Developer: **Eutechnyx**
Publisher: **Namco**
Available: **September**

Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne

There's nothing normal about Shin Megami Tensei: Nocturne. Between the post-apocalyptic setting in which humanity has been wiped out, the intentionally harsh (but stylish) visual design and the nightmarish storyline, Atlus has concocted one unsettling RPG. Even the Turn Press Battle System, which initially seems like traditional turn-based combat, belies a hidden depth. The disturbing air also lends itself well to the demon-collecting gameplay (a demonic Pokémon comparison is inevitable), although, personally, I would have preferred characters I cared about, and the limitations on how many demons you can acquire at once is frustrating. Still, Nocturne strikes just the right chords for creepy gameplay, plus the inclusion of Dante is definitely cool. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: **PlayStation 2**
Developer: **Research and Development 1**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Available: **September**

The Red Star

The Red Star is visually arresting, 25 levels long, brimming with technique, has fantastic, mood-inducing music and draws the player in through interesting character types and good AI. Getting to know your enemy, arsenal and environment is not only essential but rewarding. it's like a modern amalgam of the best top-down shooters and side-scrollers of the '80s and early '90s from the likes of Treasure, TechnoSoft and (game creative staff) Wolf Team. You gotta respect these character designs too, especially Makita, and the whole Russian thing just rules. Too bad Acclaim discovered this niche too late. They could have made a mint tapping the hundreds of thousands that still haven't let go of their 16-bit dreams. **Dave Halverson B+**

System: **PlayStation 2, Xbox**
Developer: **Acclaim Austin Studios**
Publisher: **Acclaim**
Available: **September**

Armored Core: Nexus

First, the bad news. Armored Core: Nexus does not support online play like its Japanese counterpart. While it does have networked LAN play, this is but a small consolation to those without the equipment or close-by friends to engage in such an affair. The good news is that this latest PS2 Armored Core is packed to the gills on two discs with tweaks and all manner of minutiae for die-hard fans to debate endlessly online. Some changes, like the re-balancing of the over-heating mechanism, are debatable, while others, like the updated dual analog control are welcome. With that said, however, I still find the control too slow and awkward, and this once again hampers my enjoyment of the game somewhat. **Mike Hobbs B**

System: **PlayStation 2**
Developer: **From Software**
Publisher: **Agetec**
Available: **September**

Robotech: Invasion

Invasion's best moments remind me of a classic N64 game called Body Harvest that had a similar sense of purveying doom amidst a semi-desolate ravaged landscape—but this game's flaws cannot be ignored. Incorporating the Cyclones was a great idea, but their implementation is forced at best, with physics, sound effects and control all well off the mark. Much of the architecture is sub-par too, with settlements contrived of simple square blocks and no real sense of being inhabitable. On the upside, the character models look great, the mission structure and integrated story are well directed, there's a great sense of expanse and adventure, and Jesper Kid does an amazing job on the soundtrack. It's a wee bit short and a little slow, but fans should be intrigued by the depth and lore. **Dave Halverson C+**

System: **Xbox**
Developer: **Vicious Cycle**
Publisher: **Take 2**
Available: **October**

Sly 2: Band of Thieves

Sony's triple threat is at hand—Jak 3 being the hybrid miracle, Ratchet & Clank UYA platforming-shooter gold and Sly 2 the quintessential team-based action-stealth experience. Together they equal more game than any single man or woman deserves in one holiday season, yet, they are all upon us, and all brilliant in their own way. Sly 2 is like slipping into a living, breathing cartoon universe as you assume three very different roles (that of Bentley, Murray and, of course, Sly) each intertwined within and crucial to the plot, with gameplay devices all their own. The art direction, cinemas, sound design and control schemes are masterful, and the levels never stop giving. Sly 2 is a game that starts out really good and builds to near euphoric levels. **Dave Halverson A-**

I think it's safe to say that the folks at Sucker Punch enjoy their work.

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sucker Punch
Publisher: Sony
Available: September

Katamari Damacy

From the moment you turn on Katamari Damacy and hear the excellently zany opening theme song, let alone see the accompanying visuals, you'll know that you're not in for a normal game. The concept behind Katamari Damacy: as a tiny galactic prince, you run around Earth with the Katamari, a ball that absorbs almost anything it touches, with all the objects clumping together in a massive, rolling, ever-growing lump. The puzzle-like gameplay gets mildly addictive as you struggle to increase the Katamari's size within the time limits—plus there's just something innately entertaining about adhering cats, children and cars to the Katamari. I'm certain there's a niche that will appreciate KD's low-key visuals, warped sense of humor and slightly Monkey Ball-ish gameplay. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: September

Dog's Life

Even though it's being touted as a doggie simulator, Dog's Life is essentially just a simplistic platformer…albeit one where you can take a poop, pick it up in your mouth and hurl it at people. Appropriately enough, most of the gameplay in Dog's Life consists of fetch quests—every inept person you encounter has a job for ol' Jake—as well as a massive collect-a-thon along with some minigames (like a pissing contest). Though the doggie animation is realistic, the graphics are sub-first-gen quality, the first-person "Smellovision" view is misguided and the platforming always stays pretty basic; there's very little in the way of hazards. Dog's Life is best left to fledgling gamers or those simply seeking something unusual to play. **Chris Hoffman C-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Frontier
Publisher: Hip Games
Available: August

Shellshock: Nam '67

I'm not opposed at all to games depicting war—I enjoyed the first two Medal of Honors. What I'm opposed to is a crude, unattractive, senseless war game like Shellshock: Nam '67. The setting is Vietnam, where you'll be treated to the most tasteless, brutal depictions of bloody carnage a modern console can provide. Instead of providing a pensive, heartfelt look into the visceral atrocities of the time, we get disconnected storytelling, random moments of cold violence and a rating system that details just how skilled we were at ventilating specific Vietcong body parts. And to nail it all home, the game is only occasionally competent with its action sequences. **Brady Fiechter D**

System: Xbox
Developer: Guerilla
Publisher: Eidos
Available: September

Echo Night: Beyond

Atmosphere and pervasive unease cling to the subdued Echo Night: Beyond well enough, but when it comes to any real frights, any sort of creepy surprises, the game leaves you with nothing but anticipation. It'd get away with more of its mistakes if not for the flatlined gameplay; there's really nothing at all to accomplish other than walking around in what feels like a blank stupor. There's a lot of searching and limp puzzle solving, maintaining a running tedium that becomes even heavier the more you discover how curiously bland the ghosts really are, which aren't directly confronted. Setting a game on the moon is a great idea, but even this setting is wasted. **Brady Fiecther C-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: From Software
Publisher: Agetec
Available: August

Under The Skin

With a concept as wacky as an alien visitor who gets to steal people's identities and then use all manner of gadgets and weapons to scare the populace into a panic, Under The Skin should be a game teeming with possibilities. Too bad it's stuffed into essentially an arena-battle format where the goal is just to score points while competing against the clock and another opponent. Using weapons is fun, and chaining them together for maximum chaos is better, but the gameplay is in no way deep or involving, as it could have been if applied to an objective-based adventure. One high spot is the Raccoon City level, where you get to assume the forms of STARS members and take on a cel-shaded Nemesis. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: October

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2: Battle Nexus

For me, co-op gameplay can go a long way toward making a flawed game tolerable, and I found that to be the case in TMNT 2. Even though the action is stiff, the animation poor and the controls occasionally not as responsive as I'd like, I'm able to overlook it simply because there aren't too many four-player co-op action games out there, let alone ones with platforming elements generously incorporated into the mix—but I'd never play it solo. Unique skills innate to each turtle add to the gameplay while reinforcing the team dynamic, and the numerous unlockables are pretty nice. Sadly, the bonus 1989 coin-op, which I expected to be a high point, has had the audio butchered, significantly reducing its appeal. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: KCE Studios
Publisher: Konami
Available: October
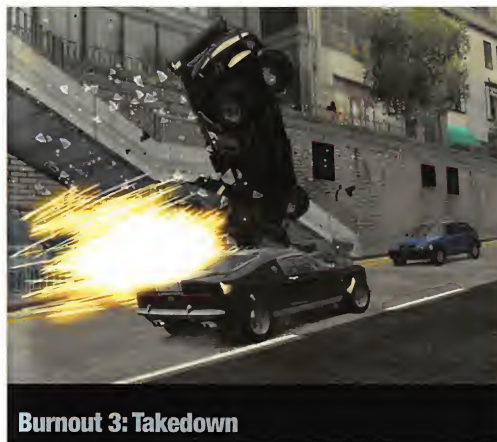
Burnout 3: Takedown

The crowd-favorite Burnout 3 takes a juiced-up approach to its racing foundation, adding sensational boost-enhanced speed, gaudy flash and awesome crash sequences to an impressively solid foundation of pure racing. Sim purists will balk, but who cares when the last thing you're trying to give gamers is refined realism? It's all about racking up points in destruction sequences, making mad moves in straight-ahead races in a number of varied competitions. Give it up to the intense finishes, aggressively adrenalized AI and good dose of actual skill involved in navigating at crazy speeds. Vomit to the worst music from the school of Blink 182 rejects licensing can buy. Combine it all and you get a dose of high-quality gaming fast food that tastes fine but leaves you wanting something that sticks. **Brady Fiechter B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Criterion
Publisher: EA
Available: September

SVC Chaos: SNK vs. Capcom

As you'd expect from a game bearing the two biggest names in 2D fighting, SVC Chaos delivers a one-on-one experience that is fun, technical, precise and filled with a fantastic cast of characters, including ones never before tossed into the Capcom vs. SNK mix. The only problem is that the whole crossover thing has been done several times already, and done better. Compared to previous incarnations of this concept, Chaos seems kind of bland, especially in the graphics department, where the Neo Geo-based backgrounds appear monochromatic and washed out. Special moves seem a bit reluctant to come out too. SVC Chaos isn't bad—actually, quite the opposite—it's just that I'd recommend any previous Capcom vs. SNK game over this one. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Xbox
Developer: SNK Playmore
Publisher: SNK Neo Geo USA
Available: September

Galleon: Islands of Mystery

Galleon sports primitive looks, stumbles occasionally during clumsy combat and doesn't move with the swift precision control everyone demands, but original Tomb Raider creator Toby Gard's spirited adventure has more heart and soul than most of his competitors' highly polished shells. What, actual good voice acting? A fun story that's presented with charisma and really does add to the experience? Involving exploration and rich flights of fantasy that take you back to the soaring adventure games they just don't make any more? The enjoyment is in the details; it's just that here, the details rely on skilled understatement. **Brady Fiechter B**

System: Xbox
Developer: Confounding Factor
Publisher: Atlus
Available: August

The Matrix Online

The next Matrix will have a cast of thousands   Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: 2K/XP	Video: 64 MB Pixel Shader
CPU: 1.5GHz+	Sound: Dx compatible
RAM: 768 MB	Internet: Broadband

The *only* place to go for the continuation of *The Matrix*, exactly where *Revolutions* left off, and with an official Wachowski-fueled storyline and Don Davis soundtrack, is The Matrix Online. This game won't be based on any forthcoming feature film, animation, comic or novel, and it happens to be a hardcore massively multiplayer online experience where thousands of gamers will play an active role in unfolding the future of the *Matrix* universe. The tenuous peace between the Machines and Zion remains intact, while other organizations—the Merovingian and Exiles—attempt to sway newcomers to their cause. Players will travel the Megacity of the Matrix in the midst of this rising conflict.
The developers at Monolith Productions, coming off a string of hits that include last year's Tron 2.0, are committed to delivering the most entertaining and satisfying online RPG on the planet. With Sega's QA and distribution muscle, and Warner Bros. Interactive's considerable market reach, The Matrix Online looks to be a very strong contender. To confirm this assessment, we spent some time at Monolith's headquarters and secured an extended session with the talent behind MxO's development. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Monolith Productions
Publisher: Sega/Warner Bros. Interactive
Available: November

Interview
Nathan Hendrickson, Lead World Designer/Cinematics   01

play: What were some of the initial challenges of building such a massive cityscape?
Nathan Hendrickson: Basically, the initial challenge was finding all of the resources we needed for the city, then identifying what we wanted to build and finding a way to build it. With the *Matrix* universe, the city is pretty much a conglomeration of *all* the cities of the real world, so we took a lot of those references. We conceptualized this material with the artists, and they began creating each resource for us. From there, we started shaping the city.

Obviously this involves a huge selection of resources. How does your world-building tool help to maximize the use of all this content?
The tools were difficult at first...we had a lot of needs. We had to take a finite amount of resources and spread them out across an entire city, without constantly requesting new material from the art team. This includes the Downtown, Slums, International and Barrens districts. So we came up with methods in the tool to take a single building shell—a skyscraper, for example—and do three, four, maybe even 10 different texture styles for it to match the theme of the district.

How close do you have to work with the mission designers to ensure that the building layouts are compatible with their ideas?
Working hand-in-hand with the mission team is integral for the world team.

Everything that we create for interior spaces has to match up with what they have in mind. If we don't provide them with the material they request, they can't script cool missions around these locations. So we stay perfectly in sync, building what they need, on-the-fly.

You're assembling MxO's cutscenes with the help of *Matrix* comic writer Paul Chadwick, while actors from the films will give a voice to their virtual personas. Is it nerve-wracking to be working so intimately with the future of this huge franchise?
It's great as a fan to see where this story is going; when I get these storyboards in, it's new and exciting to me as well. When it comes to integrating them into the cinematics, obviously we want to make sure the actors are portrayed well, and it's our responsibility to make sure that the story is presented in a compelling way. When possible, we reference the films for likenesses and stuff like facial expressions. We're continuing to refine the system, to make it easier on the live team to prepare all-new cinematics in a short time frame.

Do you see these cutscenes as a reward for players?
Absolutely. If you're the first to reach a critical story cutscene with major characters and events, *everyone* on the server will know of the encounter and your involvement. Day-to-day activity will also change. Besides this, I think they're a great insight into the story of *The Matrix*. They add more to the universe and you get to follow the characters you cared about beyond the film. No other franchise has done this, as far as I know, and the Wachowskis are fully committed to continuing this well into the future. If you're just a *Matrix* fan, this is officially the only place where you can see the story progress beyond *Revolutions*. There are some major turns coming up in the script...
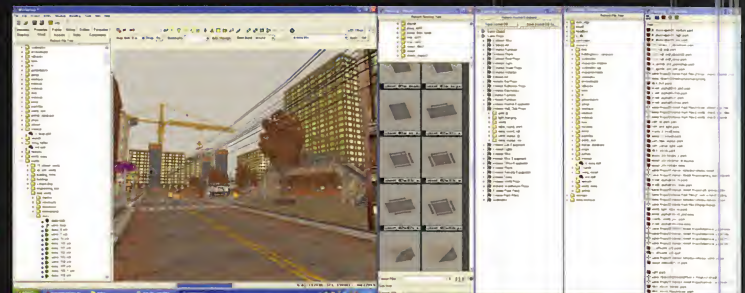
These are actually the same tools the machines used to create the Matrix world. Or not.

play: According to the films, the era of the Matrix city itself is permanently rooted in the year 1999, for various reasons. How does this affect artistic decisions about the game's visuals?
Andy Hoyos: Well, the year...to be honest, I don't pay much attention to this detail. It's just the overall look of the films that guides the process, and the challenge there, of course, is to expand upon what we've seen in the *Matrix* movies, stylistically, to work in a large-scale gameplay sense.

By sticking to the aesthetic "rules" of the films, you're probably dealing with some limitations. One detail that comes to mind is that unique color palette chosen for the Matrix...
Right. It is definitely a gritty, down-to-earth palette. And like the films, we have no blue objects in the game. There is obviously some blue in the palette to create other colors, but we don't have any overtly blue objects: no blue sky, no blue signs and no blue clothing. This remains consistent with the palette theme that was started in the films, basically, as the Matrix side of that visual design has no blues. It's the real world scenes that have all the blues, like the hovercrafts and Zion, to represent life and reality.

What type of assistance have you had from *The Matrix*'s film production crew, with regards to set design and other visual elements?
Early on, we spoke to the Wachowski brothers and also to Owen Patterson, the production designer on the films. Owen was able to provide us with some good guidance on almost every aspect of our game production, in terms of what makes *The Matrix* unique, what makes the technology feel a certain way and have a certain appearance—even the buildings, the lack of shadows, or the absence of many living things. Ultimately, our art production was guided in large part by the first film.

Did you receive any feedback based on actual in-game artwork, and have you been able to take any artistic liberties?
Based on early material and lots of conceptual stuff, we were told what we were doing right and where we had gone slightly astray. There was also an early test I had done, using the actual game engine: I had colored and tinted the screen, given it the pervasive "Matrix Green," and Owen let us know if we had gone overboard or nailed it. Probably the biggest liberties we've taken involve the characters and clothing. In the films, clothing tends to be very cool, a cross between 1930s and modern day—clean, shiny and leather-like. We needed more color and variety though, so we took the basic design style and really expanded upon it.

> "...the challenge there, of course, is to expand upon what we've seen in the *Matrix* movies, stylistically, to work in a large-scale gameplay sense." *Andy Hoyos art director*
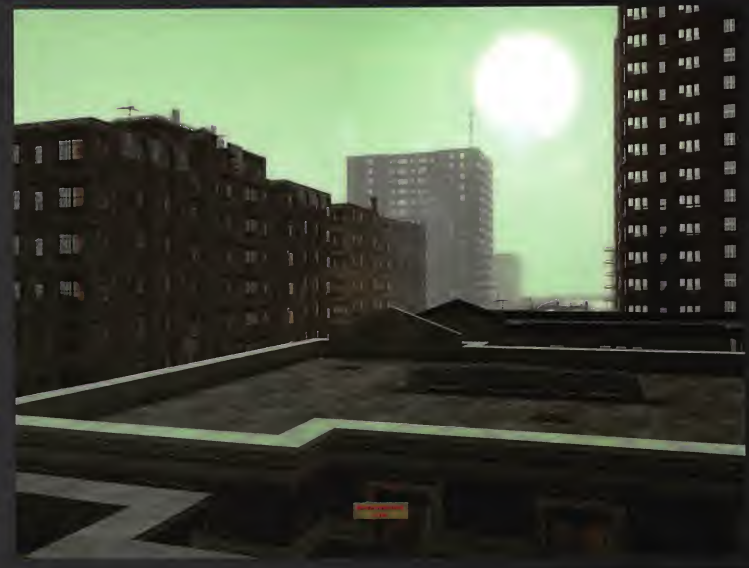
play: As an animator, what sort of challenges are you faced with, given the game's sophisticated art style and the abundance of martial arts?

Daryl Affleck: The biggest challenge was having so many different martial arts styles, and within each of those styles having it broken down into power, speed and defense, and within each of those, attacks, blocks, dodges and reactions. Creating a system where all of these different pieces could link together seamlessly in an online Matrix world required some major planning.

What methods have you devised to allow two different martial arts techniques to flow together so smoothly?

We didn't want to flood the animators with excessive stuff, and there's certainly a lot to consider. Imagine a Karate Power Attack, and all the iterations of that, versus a Wushu Kung-Fu Speed Block. Now picture the same attack versus a Dodge, and the same attack versus a Reaction, and every possible defensive position. Obviously, a lot of this would be extraneous, so we came up with the "Interlock" system, where animations could be assigned to one of several static corresponding contact points.

How does the Interlock system work as combatants are exchanging blows?

We came up with a "robot lattice," a little green robot that has these red hit locations on it. The attacker would hit those red spots at specific areas, according to the move, and then, when it came time to defend, we'd have the character block or dodge at the appropriate location, or get hit. These invisible red markers helped us achieve a common point of contact, so that even when characters are moving freely across the screen, if they're locked in combat, the lattice and contact points move at an even and constant rate. Our contact system will also allow for some really great emote animations between characters.

The online aspect must have played havoc with all that move synchronization. How does this system avoid possible performance issues with clients not seeing the correct animations at the proper time?

With the way our combat system works, hit-to-hit based on a continual selection of moves, we actually build a new intro and conclusion animation for each one of the move pieces, from contact to contact. It's pretty sneaky; you make your choice, and then we basically query what the result will be ahead of time, and then we spit out a number to both clients and they see the correct animation move being played out whether they have similar connection speeds or not. Another benefit here is that players won't see very much repetition in the combat animations. Although most are designed to link together with other pieces to form a sequence, we have over 4000 individual animations.

Melee combat is one angle. How did you manage to synchronize gunplay and martial arts?

[Laughs] That was tricky. We hit the melee stuff early on, and came up with that great system for martial arts. Later we had to consider martial arts versus weapons, and vice-versa, and it threw a bit of a curve on the system. To make the martial arts a lot more dynamic, we added the arcing and flipping and spinning, and, with a little tweaking, we managed to infuse the gunplay with similar moves. Pretty soon every combat form flowed together really well.

Do you feel that MxO's combat animation is better than anything else in the genre?

Yeah, definitely. We actually ran a few comparisons of screens between other MMO games to see what the combat was like. Basically you see a lot of static characters, with one guy swinging while the other stands there getting hit as some particle effect plays over top of him. I guess people are used to that now since it's all they've seen. We've been given the flexibility to deliver some really good animation here. We're able to lock the stuff together and provide great hand-to-hand combat with awesome reactions, and still have cool gun shootouts and virus effects. Veteran MMO players will be saying, "Wow, how come the other games aren't doing this?"

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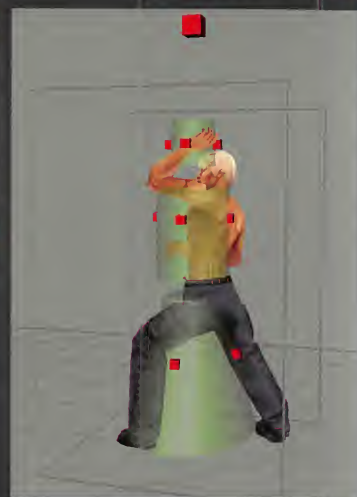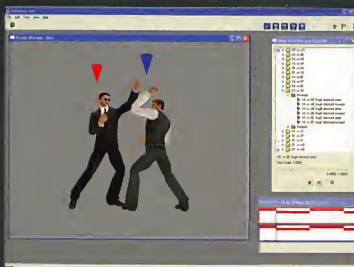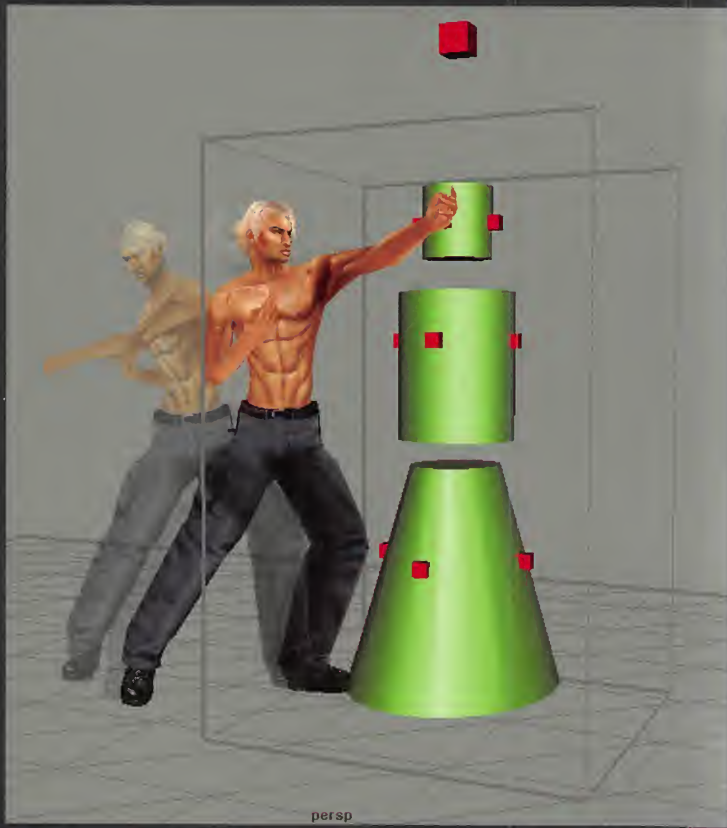
This "robot lattice" was used to develop The Matrix Online's battle animations.

"Veteran MMO players will be saying, 'Wow, how come the other games aren't doing this?'" *Daryl Affleck, lead animator*

play: Are missions specifically tailored to unique class abilities?

Brad Lansford: That's one of the exciting elements of our mission system, in that it allows multiple paths to reach one objective. Here's a basic example of that in practice: Let's say one of your objectives, as an operative for your organization, is to reach something behind a locked door. There are several different characters that can approach this in several different ways. A Soldier type would probably look around for guards, who might be carrying a key, and take them out. A Spy has a lock-picking ability, so he would likely use that to bypass the door. A Hacker might tap into the on-site security system, hack the computer and unlock the door.

Will missions be designed to accommodate a certain amount of players?

The factors we have built into the mission system will automatically balance out the difficulty, scaling to adjust for more team members. So if you add more people to the mission team, more enemies will populate in the area.

Online players are wary of excessively long play sessions and downtime. Will MxO have full missions that can be completed in a short amount of time?

We have many short missions. The very

first mission in the game involves you jacking in to a Hardline and picking up a potential "Red Pill" that is living in the Matrix—as opposed to a "Blue Pill," those that are plugged-in and unaware. You talk to the person, and they eventually become sold on the idea of freedom, and you escort them to the Red Pill extraction point. This is where, like in the first film with Neo, Red Pills are tracked and led to a location for possible extraction.

That sounds pretty straightforward. Are there any twists or surprises in basic missions?

Even in a simple mission like I just described, there's an element of surprise to be had based on choices. You could be ambushed by NPCs on your way to the target, or you might arrive at the Red Pill only to witness somebody else talking him out of it and swaying him to their side— and suddenly he becomes hostile towards you. Our goal is to ensure that missions are unpredictable.

It sounds like missions are the primary mechanism to progress the storyline. What factors determine how the missions and plotline progress for each player?

We have missions that require a certain level of "Reputation" before they can be accepted. It's up to players to manage their Reputations. Let's say there's a significant plot mission that has you obtaining an artifact from a mysterious character. If you have a higher Reputation, you'll be accepting the same primary task, but something much grander in scale will occur for you, compared to another person who goes into the same mission but with a minimal Reputation. So there's a definite motivation to keep playing and increasing your Reputation level, as the

"If you have a higher Reputation, you'll be accepting the same primary task, but something much grander in scale will occur for you..."

Brad Lansford **lead mission designer**

story missions you accept become more and more complex.

Besides the story rewards, will missions be a superior source of item loot, compared to the kickback from standard street thugs?

They are. We have containers on-site in the mission areas, and we have loot populating those—so there's definitely an item incentive to go into the missions. You can always investigate the containers, and if there are no mission-critical items in them, generally we'll reward the looter with some kind of good item.

Can you do missions single-player all the way up to the max level cap?

Right now, it would be hard to say whether that would be enjoyable or not. I would encourage you to play with your friends. There are better rewards and other incentives like an experience bonus

when you have more players with you.

Finally, what do you think separates MxO's mission system from other popular online RPGs right now?

The hand-crafted story missions have a very strong narrative, and move the overall *Matrix* storyline ahead. That's part of the excitement of this game. And when you compare what we have to the other MMOs, they have very simplistic mission objectives: "Go here, and kill 10 of these NPCs," or "Go there, and gather 10 of these items." We don't have any missions that are gauged like that. We have fun detective stuff, some deep investigative work and, while many missions involve simply taking out specific targets, [in] the plot ones we do have a real element of surprise and a really satisfying complexity. To me, once you've sat down and experienced a few of the missions in The Matrix Online, I just wouldn't want to go back to the other games.

The Red Pill Beckons

MxO's great visuals will benefit from several intelligent optimizations. Unlike the metropolis of City of Heroes, detailed exteriors and building interiors are seamlessly integrated in The Matrix Online, thanks to an advanced load balancing system. This makes for incredibly vast areas of uninterrupted city gamespace. Pixel shaders are used to define many color schemes, as opposed to tons of baked-in color, allowing for a huge variety of unique characters on screen without over-taxing your video memory. Monolith is also running actual game client fly-bys on a dozen "drone machines" with different configurations, 24 hours a day, to iron out any compatibility issues.

Essentially, it all amounts to this: after years of great game development, Monolith isn't about to drop the ball with MxO. And as the *Matrix* films and side projects like *The Animatrix* have shown us, the Wachowski brothers know *exactly* who they want to work with. You don't need an Oracle to see the bright future ahead for The Matrix Online.

Counter-Strike: Source

The classic shooter gets remixed at the Source

Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: 2K/XP	Video: Dx9 compatible
CPU: 2.4 GHz	Sound: Dx compliant
RAM: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

Half-Life mods really are the embodiment of longevity in the FPS genre. Between the original Counter-Strike and its mod brethren, Team Fortress and Day of Defeat, all told, Valve lays claim to over 85 percent of the online action market to this day. After five years, devout fans continue to fill thousands of servers and engage in rabid international competition. It's fitting then that all original Half-Life content—including every major modification—is being given a full Source facelift for release in the near future. The Source update of the most popular online action game of all time, Counter-Strike, is entering the spotlight alongside Half-Life 2 as the game's companion multiplayer component. Needless to say, that is one serious tag-team package.

While the Source engine certainly provided Valve with a tremendous amount of technology leverage to enhance Counter-Strike's presentation, the real challenge involved preserving the pace and feel of the gameplay. Back when it was first released, CS made a huge impact on the Half-Life community with its innovative Terrorist versus Counter-Terrorist gameplay. The addictive team-based objectives of bomb planting and hostage rescuing in a first-person action scenario cast the foundation for many of the online squad shooters that followed. In modeling CS: Source's gameplay, Valve has decided to combine the best features of Counter-Strike version 1.6 and CS: Condition Zero, so the ill-fated Riot Shield is out, while stuff like retrieving grenades from your fallen teammates is in. Major features, such as the cash/points system (which allows players to buy weapons and armor between rounds), remain intact,

and all maps and key locations stay very close to their original form. Interestingly, the biggest change to the feel of the gameplay comes as a result of Source's implementation of Havok physics. Barrels, once a semi-effective fire cover, can be moved and manipulated realistically (and fatally), while many other physically simulated objects demonstrate dynamic reactive movement, where the original Counter-Strike games are comparatively static. Overall, there's just a lot more activity from props and debris to watch out for now that physics are in place.

Clearly the most exciting improvement that Counter-Strike: Source brings to its longtime player base is a completely refined presentation. Classic maps like Aztec and Dust have never looked so good. With full shader support, bump mapping, complex smoke and decals, vastly improved player and weapon models, and an overall spike in poly counts, CS: Source looks very good in action. Fans will be thrilled by the integration of model physics, as slain terrorists and agents get tossed around the screen. Valve has gone the extra mile with sound as well, with live re-recording of weapon effects at a shooting range and, according to their sound team, "there are more megabytes of ambient sounds in CS: Source than in all the other CS games combined." The Source engine, especially in its Counter-Strike incarnation, is amazingly scaleable. Gamers with modest CPUs and ancient Dx7 video cards like the MX 440 are reporting consistently smooth 30fps gameplay at medium settings, while those with powerful Dx9 rigs can max out their options, easily nailing over 60fps in the midst of heavy action.

Whether you're a big fan of the genre or not, Counter-Strike's intuitive gameplay and classic level design have always been one of the must-try experiences in online gaming. With the addition of the Source technology and all of its ramifications, it has now become essential. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Valve
Publisher: Valve
Available: September

> "Fans will be thrilled by the integration of model physics, as slain terrorists and agents get tossed around the screen."

Counter-Terrorists: 0   Map: de_dust
Terrorists: 5   4:52

Gr1m// clanless (100)

Counter-Strike: Facts

- The Counter-Strike franchise has sold more than 3.5 million units worldwide.
- Over 150,000 people are playing Counter-Strike simultaneously at any given time on any given day.
- Counter-Strike generates more internet traffic than the entire nation of Italy.

Ragnarok Online

A welcome respite from the mainstream   Feature

This is an era in PC gaming where massively multiplayer online RPGs are approaching a new level of market saturation. The side effect of this mainstream occupation is that gamers are becoming more experienced with the brand of gameplay the genre often perpetuates, and developers are recognizing this as they design new content. As a result, like any genre, new games or expansions are often catered towards a more advanced player. It is becoming increasingly difficult for new players to find an accommodating entry point in MMOs, where years of experience and rigid system specs aren't required. Gravity's Ragnarok Online may be the ideal candidate to fill that void, while injecting the genre with a little anime spirit and an old-school RPG flavor.

Ragnarok Online is an ongoing project, currently offering international English players two large servers and hundreds of hours of content. Unlike a next-generation MMO powerhouse like The Matrix Online, which will require a rather powerful PC to achieve good performance, Ragnarok will run smoothly on older, average machines. The game's overhead 3D engine is relatively simple, rendering water and static lighting through a T&L engine, as opposed to the pixel and vertex shader requirements of most new online RPGs. The decidedly old-school hand-drawn sprites that make up the game's varied character designs are the most endearing graphical detail for hardcore Ragnarok players; these online personas come in multiple male and female variations, with loads of anime-inspired wardrobe choices, quirky manga-style character emotes and battle animations that one might find in popular 16- and 32-bit console RPGs. One of Ragnarok's strongest elements is its sprawling soundtrack, featuring over 60 themes, dipping into almost every conceivable genre from pop rock to classical to jazz.

Beneath the surface of Ragnarok's retro presentation, there's a fully developed online game with surprisingly deep character development options and PvP gameplay. Players can form cooperative groups, craft and trade items, and communicate over private chat channels. Characters will advance by gaining experience in Base and Job levels. Your Base level improves your ability to handle higher level creatures and allows you to improve your primary stats, while the Job level provides the upgrade path between major class titles, such as the Archer ascending to Hunter, or the Acolyte graduating to Priest. Each sub-class has loads of combat or utility skills, and there's an interesting duality to certain skills whereby a beneficial party effect might become a detrimental offensive effect when used versus certain types of foes. This is a rather elegant solution to developing and learning new skills in defensive and offensive situations. Some classes have totally unique skills, such as the Paladin's Shield Boomerang or the Knight's ability to summon a "Peco Peco" mount that increases movement rate and spear damage. For especially ambitious groups of players, large guilds can occupy castles in persistent areas of the world, complete with custom banners and crests, and huge guild-versus-guild combat can be staged to defend territory and gain specific guild war experience points.
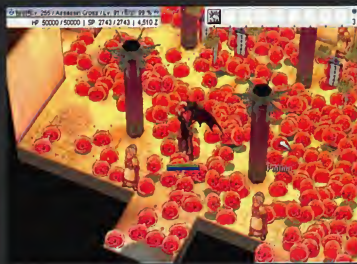
Adding further depth to RO's character customization, there are 24 pets to tame, with specific food and accessories to keep your little fella happily emoting, and a Card system to attach bonus effects onto weapons and armor. Gravity is assembling several major future updates, including racing and arena battles with a full ranking system, where one's rank actually improves abilities in real-time, and a Fame system for talented craftsmen. MMO newcomers, especially anime and manga fans, will find Ragnarok Online to be very accessible, while vets may be pleasantly surprised by the game's extensive advancement options.
Mike Griffin

> "...injecting the genre with a little anime spirit and an old-school RPG flavor."

Doom 3

Unbelievable presentation meets classic action | Review

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 128 MB GeForce FX 5600+
CPU: 2 GHz+	Sound: SB Audigy 2
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

Usually the greats of the survival horror genre have the exclusive on genuine, wide-eyed tension in bizarre and ghastly locales. That is, until id decided to drop the bomb on convention with Doom 3. Conceived within a stunning new engine, the game's sci-fi/horror venue lays out a series of decidedly old-school FPS action scenarios, soaked in the most enthralling and disturbing atmosphere seen or heard on the PC so far this year.

The sprawling, demon-infested Mars research facility that serves as Doom 3's main setting virtually radiates credibility, spread across a convincingly complex industrial architecture manned by a workforce unknowingly condemned to a nightmare. As you navigate through the innards of this massive base, every major chamber or corridor has its own departmental name, and the accompanying thematic level design looks absolutely appropriate. Almost every section showcases an incredible latticework of animating technology, from the smallest computer devices to huge pistons, clamps and other robotic machinery ensconced within busy, gyrating manifolds. The sense of complete structural and industrial legitimacy is balanced by a human element, as you discover the PDA voice logs and email of facility staff stationed at various sections of the Mars base, discussing operational details, politics and the

strange occurrences foreshadowing the impending demonic invasion. As a result, it never feels like you're in some generic futuristic Mars base—this compound is being run by the wealthy Union Aerospace Corporation, it's an enormous project operating above the law, attempts to harness ancient technology have gone awry, certain parties have formed a pact with an ancient evil, and now everyone in the joint is in deep shit. The real beauty of this plotline lies in the pacing of events, as you arrive on the scene literally minutes after the *release*, and the state of the facility perfectly reflects Hell's sweeping onset.

Despite the fleshed-out story and setting, the real draw is the concert of technology inside this wickedly effective engine. The lighting quality and bump mapped texture work are astounding. Deeply layered metallic and organic surfaces gleam and glimmer, meticulously shaded beneath piercing specular strobes and the kind of saturated colored lighting that id is known for, while unsparing use of shadow conceals many areas in a near-smothering darkness, with sharp light sources slashing through the gloom. The exaggerated distortion from thick glass and heat haze is unique, though a tad garish, while a similar displacement effect around the nucleus of grenade and rocket detonations looks fantastic. The creature designs and models are excellent,

featuring an updated roster of classic Doom minions swathed in breathtaking normal maps, shaded to perfection. They also animate extremely well, as we witness Imps scampering across walls, a Zombie bashing its head into a window and the awesome Cacodemon hovering and strafing while tossing plasma bolts. Doom 3's amazing sound design somehow matches the potency of its visuals, with superb incidental mechanical effects, powerful atmospheres of wind, lava and electricity, and seamless mixing of subtle tension-building ambient rhythms. Each enemy has distinctive movement and voice effects cuing you in to their presence, from the otherworldly radio transmissions of Zombie Marines to the frighteningly bizarre baby shriek of the Cherubs. Between the gorgeous effects, intricate industrial designs and scintillating sound, Doom 3's overall aesthetic sophistication is currently unmatched.

Doom 3's gameplay is as advanced as it needs to be, given the type of level designs and creature abilities. You won't find crawling or leaning controls here. You can fire one of several classic weapons (including the BFG), jump and sprint. Any more than this would probably bog down the intended action. Don't look for squad tactics or complex AI

from the hell spawns; they have specific attacks and will come at you with vicious determination. Don't expect complex puzzles or objectives; you have a base to traverse, doors to open, guns to reload and demons to ventilate. While it could be argued that the old-school pacing and scenarios contrast too harshly with the game's cutting-edge presentation, the action is nonetheless *very* satisfying. It actually gives the incredible atmosphere room to surround and intoxicate, without being lost in the trappings of convoluted modern gameplay clichés. One point that deserves criticism is the overuse of Imps jumping out from behind sliding doors. This is one retro novelty that wears mighty thin halfway through the campaign.

At the time of this writing, Doom 3's multiplayer game is pretty weak, insofar as performance and flexibility. The default four-player Deathmatch is decent, but you'll experience some stability issues on custom servers and maps around the 16-player mark. Quake IV is the one to watch for killer multiplayer. Meanwhile, do not miss out on Doom 3's gorgeous and entertaining campaign. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: id Software
Publisher: Activision
Available: August

Abominations for the slaughter. Do the right thing and blow 'em back to Hell.

"...the most enthralling and disturbing atmosphere seen or heard on the PC so far this year."

Postscript

EA to launch Star Wars Galaxies in Japan

LucasArts has entered into a publishing agreement with EA to launch their flagship MMO Star Wars title across Japan this December. Japanese gamers will be receiving a very attractive SWG package, as EA intends to launch with a fully updated Star Wars Galaxies client *and* the Jump to Lightspeed space exploration expansion all in one package. LucasArts will oversee the task of translating and localizing the game for the Japanese market, while Electronic Arts will handle all further operational details, from server hosting to customer support. Electronic Arts Japan seems to be confident that they will succeed with the title based on the strength of the Star Wars franchise and Galaxies' warm critical approval in North America.

World Cyber Games approaching Grand Final

After traveling the globe assembling the most talented gamers for the better part of eight months, the World Cyber Games 2004 Grand Final is slated for October 6th to 10th, opening at the Civic Center Plaza in San Francisco. Expecting thousands of attendees for the Grand Final, the WCG will offer passes to special presentations and competitions throughout the event. This year's slogan is "Beyond the Game," and the organizers' goal is to encourage young players from across the globe to interact and create friendships as they come together to celebrate digital entertainment and international culture. Naturally, the hardcore competitors will come together to celebrate blowing each other away for a slice of the prize. PC games expected to take center stage at the final in both team and solo disciplines will include: Counter-Strike: Condition Zero, Unreal Tournament 2004, Starcraft: Brood War, Warcraft 3: Frozen Throne and Need for Speed: Underground. The World Cyber Games and its sponsors are always on the lookout for the next big gaming talent, and non-pros will be able to engage in friendly competition in several PC and console titles during the Grand Final event.

Battlefield Vietnam receives WWII facelift

EA's Battlefield 1942 was once a hugely popular online team shooter, but after the release of its more sophisticated brother-in-arms, Battlefield Vietnam, many fans migrated over to the newer game. Recognizing this inevitable draw, EA and Digital Illusions decided to update some BF 1942 content to Battlefield Vietnam standards, in part to demonstrate the power of the new engine and tools. The result, now available for download, is the WWII mod pack—featuring the Iwo Jima, Wake Island and Invasion of the Philippines maps. These aren't just straight ports of the original 1942 maps; instead, the mod team painstakingly updated the geography to take full advantage of the engine's powerful terrain, flora and foliage rendering. The Battlefield cognoscenti will recognize that this dense tropical overgrowth adds a whole new flavor to the gameplay, as infantry troops enjoy superior camouflage, making them a dangerous threat to jeeps and tanks and a more evasive target versus aerial attacks. The redesigned vehicles of the Pacific Theatre will have new physics and additional open-air weapon batteries, and many of the combat stunts will return from BF 1942, such as wing-walking on planes or providing cover fire from the roofs of moving vehicles. Capping off this well-rounded mod, AI bot teammates now mimic BF Vietnam's responsive behavior, and you can pipe your personal MP3 collection through each vehicle's on-board radio. Just don't play those tunes too loud, lest your enemies hear you coming...

Doom 3 unleashes hell on worldwide sales charts

Activision has proudly announced that id Software's Doom 3 is slaying the competition on worldwide sales charts. The game easily rocketed to the top of U.S. charts during its first two weeks at retail, according to NPD reports. In the UK, Doom 3 was the No. 1 overall best selling game during the final weeks of August as per Chart Track. Down under, Australia's GFK Inform Database reported Doom 3 as the best-selling PC game in the country for the week ending August 15. During the same timeframe, GFK reported Doom 3 as the No. 1 best-selling PC game in France, Media Control confirmed the game's No. 1 overall status in Germany, and Manual Sweden, Denmark and Norway each recorded Doom 3 as the No. 1 best-selling game in their respective countries. We'll extend our congratulations to id and Activision on the success; it's certainly well deserved.

NPD Top PC Games

	Sales figures 8/08/04 to 8/14/04
01	**Doom 3** *Activision*
02	**The Sims Deluxe** *EA Games*
03	**Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection** *Microsoft*
04	**The Sims Mega Deluxe** *EA Games*
05	**Rise of Nations** *Microsoft*
06	**Warcraft 3 Battlechest** *Blizzard Entertainment*
07	**The Sims: Superstar** *EA Games*
08	**Age of Mythology** *Microsoft*
09	**Halo: Combat Evolved** *Microsoft*
10	**Battlefield Vietnam** *EA Games*

RPG veterans join Cryptic Studios' City of Villains team

With the City of Villains expansion, NCsoft and Cryptic Studios will be adding a much-anticipated PvP element to their highly successful comic book-inspired massively multiplayer online role-playing game, City of Heroes. While this involves seemingly endless play-balancing sessions to ensure a fair and rewarding player-versus-player combat environment exists, Cryptic is aware of how important CoH's rich storyline has become to their fanbase. To help maintain a solid foundation in strong design and narrative, Cryptic has added two RPG vets to the City of Villains team: Dave Cook, the original designer of the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons 2nd Edition Dungeon Master's Handbook, praised for his contribution to the genre with an induction into the Adventure Gaming Hall of Fame last year, and Shane Hensley, a longtime RPG storywriter coming off stints with FASA, TSR and SSI. Dave takes on the senior designer role, while Shane comes on board as the game's senior writer. Within Cryptic, the dynamic duo has been dubbed "The Architects of Evil."

Def Jam: Fight for NY

It's about the lifestyle, not the fighting style — **review**

I guess EA just doesn't know when they have a great thing on their hands. With last year's Def Jam Vendetta, EA got a hold of AKI's trademark wrestling game engine, still considered to be the best in the business, and even though it was simplified slightly from previous incarnations, it still made for an excellent game that could be enjoyed by anyone, hip-hop fan or not. But with Def Jam: Fight for NY, the series has journeyed even further from what made AKI's past endeavors great. Gameplay has been simplified with only a handful of grapple moves per character, while at the same time made less intuitive with the addition of a strength modifier button that must be pressed to initiate strong strikes and grapples. Fortunately, new fighting styles, more weapons, added match types, rowdy crowds and some wicked, brutal environmental interactions help make up for the watered-down brawling, but the focus in Fight for NY is clearly not on the action so much as it is on living it up in the hip-hop lifestyle. As in other similarly styled games, players now get a "crib" to call their own, and get to spend their hard-earned cash to buy new outfits, new hairstyles and lots of jewelry. It would have made more sense to have the create-a-character separate from story mode, allowing you to create new contenders as you see fit, but at least it got included this year. Also worth noting is that characters unlocked during single-player mode can now be used by all combatants in multiplayer. However, this would be a bigger deal if the fighting were more robust. **Chris Hoffman C+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: AKI Corp.
Publisher: EA
Available: September

"...some wicked, brutal environmental interactions help make up for the watered-down brawling."


WWE Day of Reckoning

Two steps forward, one chair shot back — **review**

Once again, THQ has managed to make a solid outing to the squared circle on GameCube, and once again, they've missed greatness due to some strange design choices. Building upon the same excellent, technique-driven engine from last year's WrestleMania XIX, WWE Day of Reckoning's core gameplay is a nicely polished endeavor, featuring a deep yet intuitive move set that combines a powerful arsenal of strikes and grapple moves with a worthwhile counter system. All the requisite modes are also in place, including cage matches, ladder matches, Hell in a Cell, the newly added Bra & Panties match and the Royal Rumble (still the best version yet in a video game). Most significant, however, is that the bizarre Revenge Mode from last year's game has been replaced by a more traditional story mode. Not only is climbing the WWE ranks fun, but the storylines are actually better than a lot of what is currently on WWE programming. Yet herein lies the rub: you can't use the actual WWE superstars in story mode, which kind of nullifies the whole point of playing a WWE game. Added to a slightly outdated character roster and some visuals that don't live up to their potential, it seems that even though WWE Day of Reckoning is an improvement over WrestleMania XIX, the developers should have pushed even further. So close, yet still so far from the ideal wrestling experience I was hoping for. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: GameCube
Developer: Yuke's
Publisher: THQ
Available: August
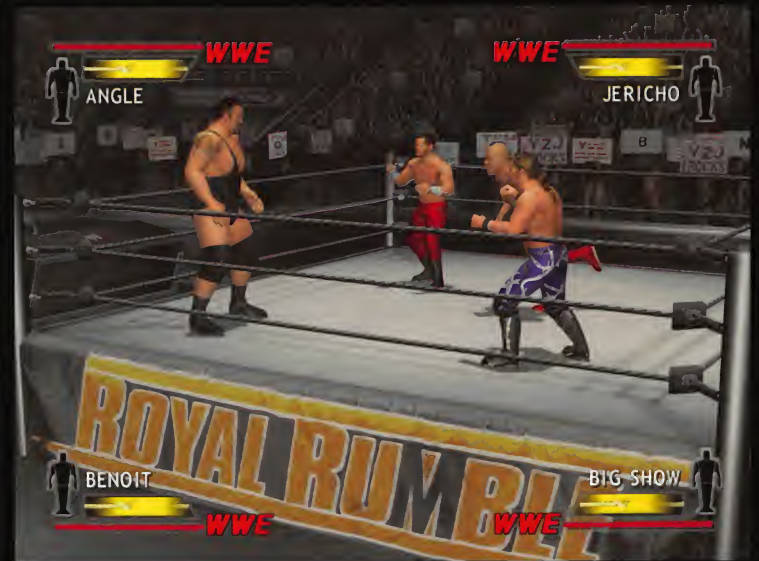
"Not only is climbing the WWE ranks fun, but the storylines are actually better than a lot of what is currently on WWE programming."

NASCAR 2005: Chase for the Cup

Strap yourself in for the best NASCAR game yet `review`

Being the only NASCAR game released this year, EA could've just rested on their laurels and rehashed last year's game for 2005. Thankfully, they took it upon themselves to overhaul the game and create a NASCAR racing experience unlike any other before it.

The biggest change in NASCAR 2005 is the incorporation of a story mode. Right when you start the game up, there are no menu screens, no options to choose—it puts you in a street race against NASCAR driver Ryan Newman. Once you win the race (it's a gimme), Newman calls you and asks you to join his modified racing team. From that point on, your racing career in NASCAR 2005 begins. You'll compete in three racing series (the Craftsman Truck Series, the Featherlite Modified Series and the NASCAR National Series) before ultimately going for fame and glory in the NASCAR NEXTEL Cup Series. Along the way, players will enhance their driving skills, earn fan support and learn how to push

their car to the edge.

Last year's brilliant Grudge and Alliance dynamic is back, with the addition of a cool new feature: the Intimidation Button. The Intimidation Button comes into play by letting the more aggressive driver influence other drivers to get the hell out of their way. It gets your adrenaline going, pulling up behind a car and then waiting for the Intimidation meter to fill up and then watching the car in front of you "chicken out" and get out of your way.

Online gameplay is back (on PS2 and Xbox), this time supporting up to four players, with the remaining 22 slots filled up with AI racers. Combine all of this with totally revamped graphics, dynamic lighting and superb sound, and you have the makings of a solid racing title. **Tom Ham A-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Tiburon
Publisher: EA Sports
Available: August

> "...a NASCAR racing experience unlike any other before it."

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005

Think you got skills? Tiger-Proofing will humble you `review`

Most people that play Tiger Woods are usually hardcore about it. It's like virtual crack—people just can't get enough of it. They'll play the game over and over again until they basically know each course like the back of their hands (me included). Bottom line—if you played the game long enough, it was easy to master.

To make this year's game much more challenging, EA Sports has incorporated an element called Tiger-Proofing—a system that allows players to modify course dynamics on the fly. Whether it is altering the tee-box length or widening a sand trap or making a fairway narrower, Tiger-Proofing ensures that top players won't be able to dominate courses like in previous games.

But Tiger-Proofing isn't free; players have to earn it, which brings us to the next cool addition to this year's game: Legend Points. Players earn points by winning tournaments and challenges. As you rack up points, you can then spend them on course customizations to eventually build your

Dream 18. You better make sure you create a challenging course; the game gives you a prestige rating. If it ranks high enough, you could attract golf legends like Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Ben Hogan.

The brilliant player customization feature returns with Game Face II. Now players have a host of new ways to create their in-game personas. Game Face II has a nearly infinite number of combinations players can use—everything from acne to age spots to wrinkles and dimples. In addition, there is a Create-A-Swing feature as well. Players can alter posture, knee flex, grip and hand placement to create that perfect swing.

Together with a deep career mode, eight new courses (14 total) and, of course, online gameplay, this latest Tiger Woods is as good as it gets. **Tom Ham A**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: EA Sports
Available: September

> "...Tiger-Proofing ensures that top players won't be able to dominate courses like in previous games."

NBA Live 2005

review

For this year's game, EA has taken freestyle control to a whole new level. A level so out of control, it's going to change the way you play basketball games…forever. It's called Freestyle Air and it goes a little something like this: imagine you take a shot and it doesn't go in. What do you do? In the past, you usually just hit the jump button and hope you came down with the rebound. Freestyle Air opens up the gameplay tenfold. With a little touch of the analog stick, you can either pull down the board or tip the ball in or, better yet, grab it and then go for the slam. So, basically, you're making mid-air shot adjustments on the fly. Freestyle Air also applies to defense as well. Players can now block shots more effectively and even steal balls from behind. This added level of defense is a welcome change to the Live game.

But the coolest feature of NBA Live 2005 is the All-Star Weekend mode. Here players can compete in four unique events including the All-Star Game itself, the Rookie/

Sophomore Challenge, the Three-Point shootout and my favorite event, the Slam Dunk Competition. Without question, this is the most revolutionary and innovative slam dunk competition I've ever seen in a game. Called Freestyle Dunking, it utilizes almost every single button on your controller to execute a perfect dunk. And just like in real life, all of the cool trick shots are possible too, including bouncing off the floor, the backboard and even your head and knees.

Other key features rounding out this top-tier title are a revamped dynasty mode, improved visuals (this year's game shows off new 10-man motion capture) and online gameplay. But words don't do the game justice—you have to experience it for yourself. **Tom Ham A**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA Sports
Available: October

"…so out of control, it's going to change the way you play basketball games…forever."

Hot Shots Golf: Fore!

review

Sony's Hot Shots Golf franchise has built its reputation on one core element—the fact that, unlike real-world golf, nearly anyone can pick up the game and play it. Hot Shots has no fancy swing mechanic, just a basic three-tap control. Most golf aficionados will probably stick to the realism of EA's Tiger Woods titles, but Fore may draw a lot of fans from the rest of us.

After players pick from a stable of 34 goofball characters (characters from other PS2 games, such as Ratchet, Clank, Jak and Daxter, become available in later levels), it's time to start competing in tournaments. Winning will open up 15 additional courses

and send players into additional short games—the miniature golf contest is a hoot. In addition to the traditional single-player mode, Fore features an online gameplay option.

Most interesting was the way Fore hides deeper play mechanics that more ambitious gamers can exploit, making this game more than the cartoonish take on golf it's advertised as. **Tom Ham B**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Clap Hanz
Publisher: Sony
Available: August

Outlaw Golf 2

review

Outlaw Golf 2 gives new meaning to the term "skins game." And with seven tournaments, 13 exhibition modes, full Live support and more derelict personas (and bouncy-bouncy) than you can shake an arrest warrant at, it's plenty deep too. If ever a sport needed to loosen up, it's golf, and OG 2 makes it happen. On top of being genuinely funny, taking stabs at the game's hysterically exaggerated stereotypes, it's a great game of golf too, from the drives to the putting greens, full of great-looking character models and effects…and the ability to go ape shit in golf carts and maybe bean a few fans.
Dave Halverson B+

System: Xbox
Developer: Hypnotix
Publisher: Take 2
Available: October

Advance Guardian Heroes

The Saturn classic returns, now with more technique than ever before

Gamers have been waiting years for this. Ever since we were treated to the mesmerizing hack 'n' slash action of the original Guardian Heroes on the Sega Saturn back in 1996, we've been waiting, wishing, hoping for a sequel to somehow emerge from the masterminds at Treasure. The waiting has paid off; the GBA has proven our savior; and playing Advance Guardian Heroes is like seeing an old friend after a long absence. Reacquainting myself with old faces like Han, Celena (that's how it's spelled now), Valgar, Kanon and even Zur is a treat, even if adjusting to the changes that have occurred during the intervening years does take a bit of time. This really isn't the same Guardian Heroes that we knew and loved, but still something rather special.

Anyone expecting Advance Guardian Heroes to play just like the original is in for a bit of a shock. The unique tri-planar battlefield system of the first game has been abandoned in favor of traditional freedom of movement. Level structure is no longer branching. The hulking undead warrior that accompanied the heroes on the original quest is also gone. And the diverse cast of colorful characters, practically bursting with personality through their appearance and banter, has been replaced by three main heroes who mostly look and play alike, with the major difference being in their magic attacks. Making up for any perceived shortcomings, however, is the depth of play that comes by way of the magic gauge. Aside from permitting characters to unleash a myriad of magical assaults (with improved controls over the Saturn game), the gauge is also used to block and parry attacks, which is now an integral part of the game. Learning exactly how to make the most of your blocking ability—carefully balancing calculated defense with necessary offense—is the key to victory, as perfectly timed parries allow you to knock shots back at foes or expose enemies' weaknesses for the killing blow. Master this skill and you will be taken to a rich, fantastic world that builds upon the legend of the original Guardian Heroes, only with more level diversity and some pseudo-platforming elements; fail to do so and you'll likely not make it past that ogre on the first level (unless you switch over to easy mode). Since players cannot continue right from where they die, as they could in the original, Advance Guardian Heroes is a substantially more challenging game.

In other respects, AGH is on par with its predecessor. A variety of special moves constantly keeps combat interesting, and the excellent stat-building system is still in place. Unfortunately, the story is just as confounding as in the original, which makes me wonder if the translation is funky or Treasure simply wants to play with our heads.

Eight years ago, Treasure made a revolutionary game out of a typical genre by adding new gameplay elements that we didn't even realize were missing. Now, with the sequel, they've done it again. Though in some ways Advance Guardian Heroes doesn't live up to the lofty expectations I held for it—I now see why Treasure shies away from sequels—in other respects it's something more. Either way you look at it, it's a great game. **Chris Hoffman B+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Treasure
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: September

The classic Guardian Heroes characters return! Yes, that's Ginjirou below.

Mega Man Zero 3

As with its predecessors, Mega Man Zero 3 is the Swiss watch of GBA games: carefully crafted, precisely assembled, built with the utmost attention to detail. MMZ3 also carries on the other traditions established by the previous games, those being stellar graphics, classically styled 2D action and some of the most difficult gameplay you'll ever have the pleasure of suffering through. Despite some added character customization options and other new features, I'm not sure the game is really any better than the last MMZ title, but it's still a great effort. I'm also still not crazy about only earning new moves through Zero's hunter ranking, since so much of the experience is trial and error, and you'll likely be humbled quickly. **Chris Hoffman B+**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Inticreates
Publisher: Capcom
Available: October

Boktai 2: Solar Boy Django

If there was one complaint I had about Konami's original solar-powered action-RPG, it was that, despite a lot of innovation, Boktai really didn't do a whole lot with the RPG aspects of its gameplay. With the sequel, Boktai 2: Solar Boy Django, that changes—in a big way. Hero Django's hometown, San Miguel, now serves as a central hub, filled with numerous NPCs with useful services like a fruit store and a Solar Smithy that can combine weapons through a complex forging process. Hammers, swords, spears and other implements join the Gun del Sol in Django's arsenal, and they can even be enchanted with various magical properties. Other changes include more challenging gameplay and additional character growth that lets players customize their stats. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
**Developer:** KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: October

Grand Theft Auto Advance

It's been a long time coming, but the GBA version of Grand Theft Auto is almost here to unleash portable carnage. Set in Liberty City a year prior to the events in GTA3, you're cast in the role of Mike, a crook looking to ditch mob life and blow town. Unfortunately for him, his best friend's been murdered, his escape cash goes up in flames—and so the fun begins. This tale of revenge sees Mike engaging in a total of more than 300 missions (some with multiple paths), jacking dozens of vehicles (SWAT vans, sports cars, delivery trucks, tanks, etc.) and committing violence with 10 weapons. Characters from GTA3 will even appear in this version of Liberty City, which is actually bigger in surface area than its console counterpart. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Digital Eclipse
Publisher: Rockstar
Available: October
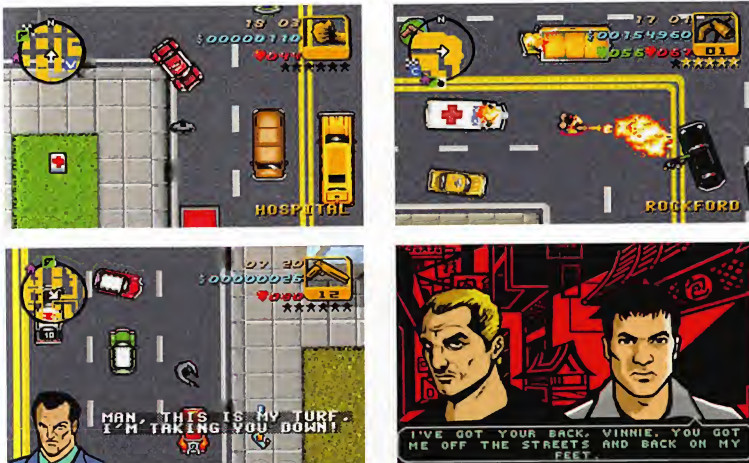
Metal Slug Advance

There was a time when I was worried that the GBA version of SNK's beloved shooter series wouldn't be up to snuff (specifically after E3), but now that I've played an almost complete version, I'm happy to say that Metal Slug Advance seems to be doing a great job of delivering the hardcore, adrenaline-pumping, shoot-'em-up action that Metal Slug is all about. This all-new installment puts you into the combat boots of either Walter or Tyra, and from there, you know the drill: charge through the missions, grab various weapon power-ups, rescue hostages and blow away everything in sight. The six levels feature multiple routes and hidden rooms, and rescued prisoners leave behind collectible "E-cards" that grant new optional abilities. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: SNK Playmore
Publisher: SNK Neo Geo USA
Available: October

Requiem
from the Darkness
Theater of pain

Requiem from the Darkness' cold colors, melancholy opening and ending themes, and haunting visual beauty serve as the perfect gateway to its dementia as it delves into the darkest depths of human nature. The very first scene we see is deeply troubling—that of a young child's brutal murder—but redemption is close at hand.

Set among the last dark days of the Edo period, we join aspiring author Momosuke Komiya, a young man who's left his successful candle-making business behind and set out on a journey to write 100 ghost stories, merely attempting to get out of the rain when he's startled by a phantom that ends up pulling him to safety after he careens over a cliff in his haste—a fateful meeting that will lead Momosuke to the brink of mortality, yet fill the pages of his book in a way he'd never imagined. The tiny, heavily cloaked little man whose path he's crossed, Mataichi the Trickster, is part of a trio of paranormal redeemers, of which he'll soon also meet Nagamimi the Bird Caller, a huge, frightening but soft-spoken ghoul of a man, and the beautiful, darkly sumptuous Ogin the Puppeteer. As fate would have it, they're in the business of serving up post-mortem just desserts, damning those responsible for the very stories Momosuke seeks to tell—a match made in hell to say the least. The only hitch is that knowing these three, let alone traveling with them, is dangerous business for a mortal, but Momosuke's curiosity gets the best of him time and time again. Even when they try to convince him otherwise, Momosuke can't resist the allure of their dark discoveries.

Requiem from the Darkness is a collection of ghostly tales and their ugly fruition that's so intoxicating and dripping with style it stands as wholly unique among the horror genre. It's at once as cool as *Bebop* and as cerebral as *Soul Taker*—genuinely troubling in an almost David Lynch way, yet somehow sexy and humorous at the same time. Redemption has never been so sweet.
Dave Halverson A-

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 16 & up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1 - "Turmoil of the Flesh"

"Even when they try to convince him otherwise, Momosuke can't resist the allure of their dark discoveries."

Meet Momosuke's advisory board. Hey li'l dude, pass the pipe.

Lady Death

War is Hell, in Hell

I love animation. I'll take it over any other form of filmmaking no matter how big the budget or spectacular the effects. There's something about moving pictures that has always resonated with me in a way live action never has. And while there's nothing as awe-inspiring as masterworks like *Akira*, *Ghost in the Shell*, *Wings of Honneamise*, *Spirited Away*, et al, there's a flipside to animation that I like almost as much, and those are films with a distinctive handmade quality. The most recent that comes to mind prior to *Lady Death* is *Heavy Metal 2000*, although it didn't have characters anywhere near as alluring as these. *Lady Death* is a distinctive work of adult animation—a collaborative work between an American director and a Korean animation studio that bridges the gap between anime and the almost non-existent adult (as in for grown-ups) animation industry here. Beyond the tame high-gloss halls of Pixar, Disney and DreamWorks, there are no Ralph Bakshis left in the West, just shiny CG makers, making the arrival of *Lady Death* all the more special.

The movie covers a lot of ground as it seemingly races by, taking us from Lady Death's origins as Hope, daughter of Matthias—Lucifer's earthly vessel—to the realization that she's the devil's daughter and her subsequent damnation by way of the worst physical and mental anguish imagin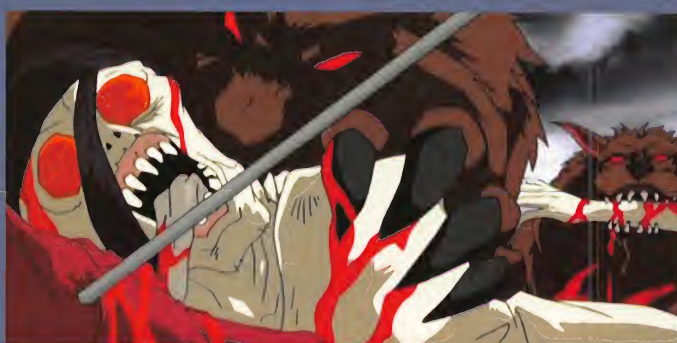able. Hope goes from young and in love to betrayed, alone and on fire in the blink of an eye, and if you thought hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, wait until you get a load of the daughter of Lucifer's scorn in hell. Payback's a bitch (on flaming horseback), even when you're Beelzebub. *Lady Death* is a bloody canvas indeed, but one dotted with great characters throughout, like the wretched Asmodeus, gatekeeper to hell; Lucifer's menacingly opportunistic jester, Pagan; tormented chief weapons master and mentor to Lady Death, Cremator; holy roller to the bitter end, Father Orbee; and, of course, Lady Death herself whom, by film's end, I wanted more of, stat.

Laden with beautifully detailed backgrounds, rich colors at even its darkest moments and inspired vocal performances, this is the kind of direct-to-DVD animation I'd love to see take off in America as an alternative to the droves of G and PG CG in our midst. While I do love their glitz and playful charm, I miss the kind of free-form animation that hooked me as a kid like *Wizards*, *Fire and Ice* and *Heavy Metal*. *Lady Death* is the modern-day equivalent of that era, when for a brief space in time animators worked as hard for adults as they did children. Perhaps ADV will continue to help rekindle that flame, or perhaps films like *Lady Death* will remain few and far between. I'll be there to embrace them either way.
Dave Halverson

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 16 & up
Running Time: 90 minutes

"...if you thought hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, wait until you get a load of the daughter of Lucifer's scorn in hell."

Lady Death's pets take time out for a little between-meal snack.
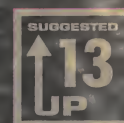
NEW FIST of the Northstar

Pop goes the bad guy

Welcome back to the land of the 100-hand whack, where there's more to see, more to do, and even more wholesale slaughter per square inch. In this blood-soaked rendition of a post-apocalyptic world gone mad, the nomadic badass to kill all nomadic badasses, Kenshiro, is back, and he's brought his Hokuto Shinken fighting technique with him—a style so lethal that a single touch can turn your insides into your outsides. For the four people who haven't heard about *Fist of the Northstar* in some capacity, here's the long and short of it: nuclear war bad, mutated human biker gangs really bad, Ken good. All anyone really wants to do is find water, and maybe start a garden, but in this world it's kill or be killed, and only the strong—and mutated—survive…unless Kenshiro happens by. The biggest difference here, other than the shiny new production values, is that Kenshiro has ditched the whole grasshopper thing (strong and silent) to play it more vigilante style. He actually has lines in the first episode; in fact, after his first few kills, he actually jumps in a dune buggy and makes a friend! He even drives! I didn't even know he had a license! Otherwise, the new *Fist* is pretty much like the old *Fist*, although I do smell more story elements. This is still the perfect anime when you just wanna zone out and see some serious carnage. And don't think the producers don't realize that there's more story on the back of a cereal box. They've sauced things up considerably with much attention to the gory details including spewing, squishing brains, blood showers (we're talking human lawn sprinklers here, people), gushy flying body parts—the works. We also get to see the actual apocalypse this time, via CG, and they do a good if not flagrant job of meshing traditional animation with CG. Thunderdome here we come! **Dave Halverson B+**

Studio: ADV Films
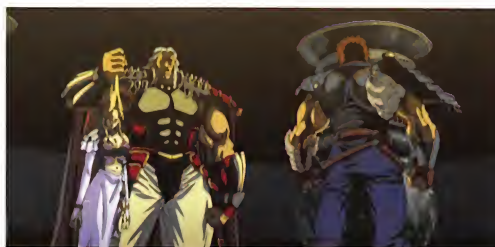**Rating:** 16 & up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1

"This is still the perfect anime when you just wanna zone out and see some serious carnage."

Mess with this man and he'll make your insides your outsides.

Burn-Up
Scramble

Scrambled egg-heads

The year is 2023 and although society is highly evolved (apparent by all of the heavy traffic), there's still a criminal element, which, although sparse, is often too much for the regular Neo-Tokyo PD to handle. These special "S-crimes"—so deemed by the Supreme Council—call for special action, so a special division of the police is formed called The Warriors, consisting of three beautiful women: Rio, a big-boobed, blonde bombshell/ martial arts expert; Maya, a calm, collected weapons expert/sharp shooter; and Lilica, a telekinetic detainee (think Rogue) who hasn't quite come to grips with her powers. For those of you familiar with the *Burn Up* series, *Scramble* is neither prequel nor sequel, but more a retelling, although parallels are quickly drawn: Rio is still aloof (to say the least), a general nuisance to society, always broke and a consummate daydreamer, and everyone's favorite man-slut, Yuji Narou, is back in business, except he's been promoted from lowly panty-sniffing cohort to chief of police, where he abuses his power in any way possible to get close to Rio…or anything that's come into contact with her milky skin. Elsewhere, Maya's still cool under fire, although she's a measure less aggressive (and sexy) than before, and Lilica is pretty much redefined, going from computer nerdess to psychic agent. The rest of the cast we'll just have to wait and see. Rio's still the star of the show though, and she's as wacky as ever, basing her every move on daily TV horoscopes down to what color clothes (underwear included) she wears, bike she rides and even food she eats. Surprisingly, the fan service has been chilled ever so slightly as well, going from flagrant to frequent (no jiggle counter here), but the plots remain well over the top. One thing that hasn't changed is that *Burn Up* is as easy on the eyes and fun as ever. **Dave Halverson B**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 16 & up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1 - "Angels Attack Assailants!"

No shortage of fan service here, nuh-uh! Not that Rio doesn't ask for it...

Get Backers
Golden retrievers

It's a strange title: "Get Backers." But then again, a lot of anime titles are a bit off. Who knew it would be about a couple of X-Men rejects who get things back? Better still, who knew that such a premise could work so well? *Get Backers* is like a cool buddy cop show without all the ancillary baggage…plus super powers. Ginji can generate electricity within his body—a handy feature for almost any occasion—and Ban can hypnotize and introduce elaborate visions into his victims, so while they're zoned out, he can go in for the kill, bust, whatever. Together there's nothing they can't get back, hence their motto: "If it was taken, we'll get it back." Too bad they're also always broke. Polar opposites (Ban's a hard-ass and Ginji's a sap) joined by fate, they're so tragically bad with money that they live out of Ban's tiny car, which he refers to as Little Miss Ladybug (with a V-Max 1200cc engine with 145 horsepower that's been nitro'd to crank out 195!), and have to meet clients in a hole-in-the-wall diner called the Honky Tonk, whose owner extends them credit in the form of slices of pizza and acts as a sort of mentor/mediator when their agent Hevn (and she is) doesn't have any life-threatening jobs in store. It's like an NBC hour-long series, only good and animated. The first episode acts as primer, setting the stage and the players, and then things take off in a major way via a three-parter that pits the Get Backers against the top transport service in Japan made up of Kuroudo Akabane, aka Dr. Jakyl—an ultra-sadistic killing machine—and Himiko Kudou, aka Lady Poison. At this point, the back story comes pouring in and *Get Backers* becomes downright awesome. This is a beautiful show in every way, with super-high production values for a TV series, plenty of high-concept action and more than enough story to back it all up. **Dave Halverson B+**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 15 & up
Running Time: 125 minutes
Volume: 1 - "G&D on the Case"

Ban goes in for some arm-kissing action, but in this case shouldn't he be kissing…

éX-Driver
The Movie

éX in the West

éX-Driver is one of the best auto-based premises ever: in a future where traffic is controlled by mainframe computers, who you gonna call when the system goes awry? éX-Drivers, of course—the only people left on the planet that get to drive honest-to-goodness gas-guzzlers, and only the best of the best get to slide behind the wheel. In Japan, those lucky three are Lisa, Souichi and Lorna, whom we've all come to know and at least like, but there are éX-Drivers all over the world, which brings us to the subject of this 64-minute movie, as an international field of éX-Drivers convene for their big tournament in sunny Santa Monica, California (if only it really looked like this). Team Japan starts things off by spending a night in jail after they take down a runaway car (they are way out of their jurisdiction) that happens to contain the daughter of USA éX-Driver team owner (and ex-mafia kingpin) Guido Gambino, who now owns a chain of grocery stores in the San Fernando Valley. Talk about a stretch. Soon after, they find themselves in a cheesy story reminiscent of a bad *Charlie's Angels* episode. But *éX-Driver* has never been about the story; it's always been best behind the wheel, and, once again, the series' beautifully detailed pairing of traditional animation and CG sparkles, not just once but twice. The DVD also contains the 25-minute bonus feature, *Nina & Rei Danger Zone*, that has them going up against, of all things, an RC car. I'll take 89 minutes of *éX-Driver* any way I can get it. **Dave Halverson B**

Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Rating: 13 & up
Running Time: 90 minutes

"...once again, the series' beautifully detailed pairing of traditional animation and CG sparkles..."
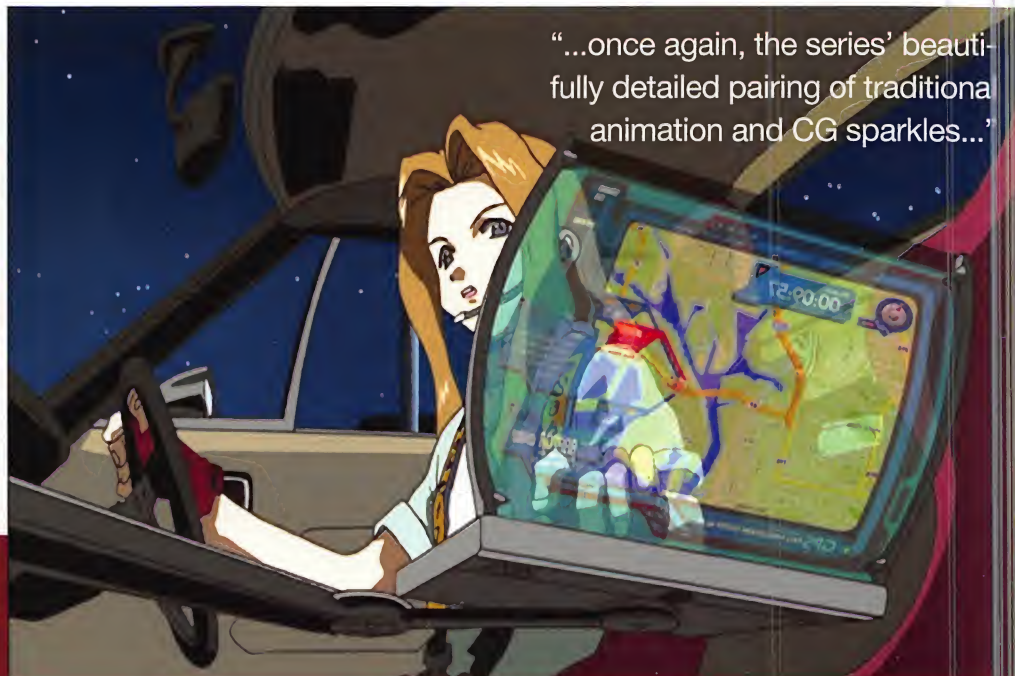
watch this

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION
—PLATINUM: 01—

EPISODE :01 Angel Attack / EPISODE :02 The Beast / EPISODE :03 A Transfer / EPISODE :04 Hedgehog's Dilemma / EPISODE :05 Rei I

Neon Genesis Evangelion: Platinum
Studio: ADV Films
Platinum is: officially revised and digitally remastered by Gainax, a 12-page booklet, foil sleeve, Matt Greenfield and Spike Spencer (Shinji) commentary and a numbered decal. If you've ever considered re-visiting *Evangelion*, now is the time.

BURN UP EXCESS
WARRIOR CASE FILES

Burn Up Excess Warrior Case Files
Studio: ADV Films
...Because you need a fat box of *Burn Up* episodes from its best season. *Excess* is four discs of requisite jiggling fun. Parental guidance not suggested.

Gregory Horror
Studio: Geneon Entertainment
The strange Capcom game we never got here is now a CG anime series, featuring a cubical cast of twisted freaks and psychologically spooky tales from the deepest recesses of the dark side...told by a square mouse.

read this

STONe
Publisher: TokyoPop
Now Reading: Vol. 1
Oceans of quicksand, unspeakable monsters, killer characters and sci-fi tributes galore—the world of STONe would eat Mad Max, poop him out, and pick its teeth with his bones. This is awesome manga...awesome.

TOKYOPOP PRESENTS
A SIN-ICHI HIROMOTO PRODUCTION

listen to this

Moonlit archives
Lunar Legend Tsukihime Original Sound Track 1

Moonlit Archives Lunar Legend Tsukihime OST
Publisher: Geneon Anime Music
This is just plain beautiful: the Castlevania of the anime OST world. Great show, great soundtrack; get both.

ANIME X-PLODE! 1

Anime X-Plode! 1
Publisher: ADV Music
American hip-hop, metal, folk, rock, house and dance inspired by the likes of *Bebop*, *Jin Roh*, *Blue Sub*, and *Hunter D*? Is that even legal? AX 1 has its moments...but *Akira* folk rock?

AMERICAN MUSIC INSPIRED BY THE BEST IN JAPANESE ANIMATION

Neo Tokyo
Studio: ADV Films
The classic comes to ADV DVD. Rintaro, Kawajiri and Otomo trip the anime fantastic as only they can in three seperate and very personal voyages.

Abenobashi: Magical Shopping Arcade
Publisher: TokyoPop
Now Reading: Vol. 1
Ready to do the time warp again? Then it's time to mainstream Arumi, Sasshi and especially Mune-mune directly into your brain. It's like crack that you read!

ABENOBASHI
MAGICAL SHOPPING ARCADE

INSPIRED BY THE HIT ANIME SERIES!

CREATED BY GAINAX
WRITTEN BY SATORU AKAHORI
ART BY RYUSEI DEGUCHI

1

animedatabase

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VIRGINMEGA.COM

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

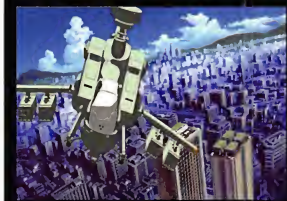| 01 | Ghost in the Shell: SAC *manga/bandai entertainment* |
02	Dead Leaves *manga entertainment*
03	Gungrave *geneon entertainment*
04	City Hunter *adv films*
05	R.O.D. TV *geneon entertainment*
06	Gad Guard *geneon entertainment*
07	Miami Guns *an entertainment*
08	Paranoia Agent *geneon entertainment*
09	Last Exile *geneon entertainment*
10	Ninja Scroll TV *urban vision*

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	Fullmetal Alchemist *funimation productions*
02	Requiem from the Darkness *geneon entertainment*
03	Paranoia Agent *geneon entertainment*
04	Dead Leaves *manga entertainment*
05	R.O.D. TV *geneon entertainment*
06	Lady Death *adv films*
07	Lunar Legend Tsukihime *geneon entertainment*
08	New Fist of the North Star *adv films*
09	Ghost in the Shell: SAC *manga/bandai entertainment*
10	Get Backers *adv films*

your megastore beckons!

Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex manga/bandai

Join Major Motoko Kusanagi, Batou, Togusa and the rest of Section 9 as they battle cyber crime.

Dead Leaves manga entertainment

Dead Leaves will rock your world...hard. This is the manic action masterpiece of the decade. There can only be one!

Dave Halverson

01	Requiem from the Darkness *geneon entertainment*
02	Paranoia Agent *geneon entertainment*
03	Lady Death *adv films*
04	Get Backers *adv films*
05	Lunar Legend Tsukihime *geneon entertainment*

ADV Films' Rod Peters

01	Lady Death *adv films*
02	Gungrave *geneon entertainment*
03	New Fist of the North Star *adv films*
04	R.O.D. TV *geneon entertainment*
05	Get Backers *adv films*

Nelson Lui

01	éX-Driver: The Movie *geneon entertainment*
02	Gundam SEED *bandai entertainment*
03	Fullmetal Alchemist *funimation productions*
04	Get Backers *adv films*
05	Lunar Legend Tsukihime *geneon entertainment*

Reader's Anime Top Five

01	Gundam SEED *bandai entertainment*
02	Ghost in the Shell: SAC *manga/bandai entertainment*
03	R.O.D. TV *geneon entertainment*
04	Gungrave *geneon entertainment*
05	Gravion *adv films*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	STONe *tokyopop manga*
02	Abenobashi *tokyopop manga*
03	Black Cat *cocoro books*
04	Lupin III: World's Most Wanted *tokyopop manga*
05	Najica Blitz Tactics *adv manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

| 01 | Tsukihime: Moonlit Archives *geneon anime music* |
02	Music Only Music But Music *geneon anime music*
03	Anime Toonz 2: Maria Kawamura *jellybean*
04	Gungrave OST Uno *geneon anime music*
05	Anime X-Plode! *adv music*

win free anime!

Kaena: The Prophecy

Starring: Voices of: Kirsten Dunst, Richard Harris, Anjelica Huston
Director: Chris Delaporte
Released By: Sony Pictures
Rated: PG-13

Native to a civilization born of a cataclysmic event, called Axis, a massive spire of twisted roots ruled by a corrupt queen of sap, Kaena stands as the link between her people's past and their only hope for a future. In order to fulfill her destiny, she must abandon what she was raised to believe, expand her reality beyond anything she's ever imagined, and through heroism forged from the nucleus of an obliterated race that came to her in a dream, overcome insurmountable obstacles to save her world... There's no way to pull this movie off other than exactly how it came to be, through a seven-year struggle that began with three people in a 200-square-foot studio and blossomed to 100, all of whom had never done anything remotely close to making a CGI film. In fact, Kaena was created on software designed to make games, if you can believe that, and the dedication to push it to the max to achieve a united goal resonates in every frame. CGI is at its best the more exaggerated the characters and worlds it's used to create become, and Kaena's is the stuff of sci-fi dreams. Three distinctly different races, a society hanging like a massive ornament in the sky and especially Kaena herself simply radiate on screen, and whoever got Kirsten Dunst to lend Kaena her voice and the late, great Richard Harris to play the lone Vecarian Opaz deserves an executive parking space. Kaena may resemble Christina Ricci, but Dunst breathes life into her as if she truly embraced the opportunity. Kaena: The Prophecy wears its slight
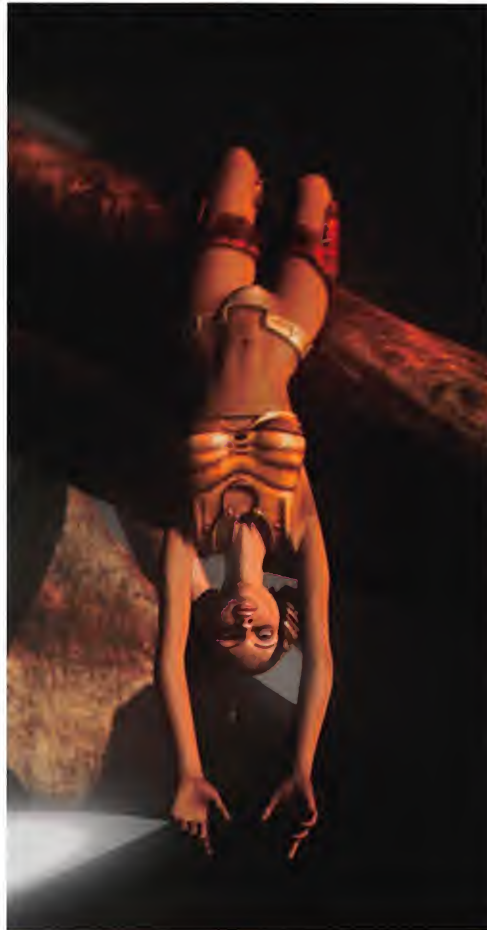
imperfections (a stutter here, a rough edit there) like a badge of honor, remnants of a process that seemingly should have ended in disaster that did quite the opposite and ended in something utterly wonderful.
Extras: The virtual interview (French with English subtitles) is the future I always wanted, and the making-of, though not extravagant, is requisite viewing. **Dave Halverson**
Movie: A- Extras: B

Elf

Starring: Will Ferrell, James Caan
Director: Jon Favreau
Released By: Warner Bros.
Rated: PG

Remove the effortlessly goofy charm of will Ferrell, and the sharp, heartfelt comedy of *Elf* wouldn't have been half as delightful. Ferrell plays Bunny, an apparently grown man who was mistakenly raised by elves, who now thinks he's one of those elves but yearns to find his real father in New York. You can pretty much predict where the film will go—some warmer moments give it a big heart around the standard plot—but it's always a riot to see Ferrell and the inspired cast push the material to laughable absurdity. Extras: Additional footage and fun audio commentary by Ferrell and director Jon Favreau. **Brady Fiechter**
Movie: B Extras: C

Man on Fire

Starring: Denzel Washington, Dakota Fanning
Director: Tony Scott
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: R

In Mexico City, kidnapping runs rampant, leading well-to-do dad Samuel to hire beleaguered drunk Creasy, typically played by Denzel Washington, to serve as his daughter's personal bodyguard. The two go through the usual bonding process, while Creasy's cold, obsessive protection gives way to a personal healing with his hurtful past. The material is flat to begin with, disintegrating under the heavy weight of Tony Scott's rugged direction and the spastic, meaningless editing. By the time the young girl (the film's bright spot is a terrific Dakota Fanning) does inevitably get snatched amidst a blazing shoot-out, sending a wounded Creasy into snap mode, *Man On Fire* sinks into a style-charged grind to see how many bodies it takes to reach retribution.
Extras: Commentary by director Scott, writer Brian Helgeland, co-star Dakota Fanning and producer Lucas Foster. **Brady Fiechter**
Movie: C Extras: C

Garfield

Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG

Scooby-Doo 2: Monsters Unleashed

Released By: Warner Bros.
Rated: PG

These two almost-criminal misfires prove once and for all that, in Hollywood, it's not what you know but who you know. I'm not exaggerating when I say that a 10-year-old could have come up with better material. I know some, so I asked; they were better. In *Garfield*'s case, the only reason to venture anywhere near it is to see and hear Murray as the fat cat, which is cool for about 15 minutes, until the story—which had to have been green-lit by either sexual favor or payola—seeps in, along with the realization that someone was actually paid money to write it. The actors hardly matter (Jennifer Love Hewitt is in serious need of a new agent) and the look is so blasé you have to wonder who it was made for. It's far too understated for kids and beneath any teen-to-adult's pain threshold. And why is Garfield CG and Odie not? I know Odie, and Mr. Producer, that's no Odie. *Scooby-Doo 2* isn't much better. The first movie actually rubbed up against good, veering slightly in the direction of the people that grew up watching it (mostly stoned) while remaining safe for Mystery Inc.'s younger viewers, but *Scooby-Doo 2* is such a mess I was looking for Joel Schumacher's name in the credits. The kiddy equivalent to *Batman Forever*, SD2 is an overblown parade of overused clichés and just plain bad ideas. To give you an example: everything of Velma's at Mystery Inc. HQ is orange, and—surprise!—in one scene they sex her up! Who could have seen that coming? This is like a clinic on how to kill a franchise. In the first film, Lillard's Shaggy was a highlight. Here he plays him so fruity and over the top you just feel bad for him, and the story does its best to make you loathe Freddy, Daphne, Velma and "the Shagster," focusing on lame stereotypes instead of mindless monster-hunting fun. Some nifty CG monsters and the CG Scooby do their best to save the day, but in the end this one seems to drive the final nail into the *Scooby-Doo* movie coffin. **Dave Halverson**
Garfield: D+ Scooby Doo 2: C

Van Helsing

Starring: Hugh Jackman, Kate Beckinsale
Director: Stephen Sommers
Released By: Universal
Rated: PG-13

Director Stephen Sommers worked an infectious, frivolous energy into his summer blockbuster *Mummy* series. It worked—barely. With *Van Helsing*, he uses a $150 million budget to hoist so much unrestrained mayhem up on the screen, you find yourself quickly screaming for the off valve. It doesn't work—even barely. This one's a shrieking

The Punisher

Starring: Thomas Jane, John Travolta
Director: Jonathan Hensleigh
Released By: Miramax
Rated: R

Tell me if you've heard this one: guy sees family members get exterminated, guy yearns for revenge, guy gets revenge while suffering through a string of nasty fights and shootouts and injuries while bonding with cast of innocent, weaker helpers. Yes, it's a comic book movie shackled to another one of those worn out action-movie setups, but that's far from the biggest grievance. And no, it's not John Travolta doing another grating *Swordfish* turn as evil kingpin leader—it's the silly puppets that dangle around angry revenge mutilator Frank Castle, who takes a sadistic approach to the graphic destruction of everything in his way. And it's the awkward turns in what could have been a good script with unusual gravitas for a comic book tale. Extras: A number of featurettes—Keeping It Real: The Punisher Stunts, The Punisher Origins, an interview with comic book writer Garth Innis, a behind-the-scenes making-of, music video performed by Drowning Pool—in addition to commentary by director Jonathan Hensleigh.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: C Extras: B

mess, never caring to slow the attention-deprived march of its special effects parade enough to let us breathe. Or, for that matter, to breathe even a modicum of life into the soulless characters, who exist as little more than pawns to battle the cadre of monsters terrorizing the land. These souped-up, CG-infected takes on classics like Dracula and Frankenstein's monster look swell enough on entrance, but the chaos they surround is over-directed and utterly artificial, stuffed together like a bloated video game. Hugh Jackman strains as Van Helsing, the hunter of these creatures on the loose, joining the miscast beauty Anna Valerious (Kate Beckinsale) in the hunt for the Count. I spent the film hunting for some semblance of a fun story behind all I was seeing, but alas, a dull, loud, confused slice of summer flotsam was all I found.
Extras: Audio commentaries by director Stephen Sommers and editor Bob Duscay, a few outtakes. **Brady Fiechter**
Movie: D+ Extras: C

Dawn of the Dead

Starring: Sarah Polley, Ving Rhames
Director: Zack Snyder
Released By: Universal
Rated: R

No way you'll find a more terrifying opening sequence this year than the bloody fun found in *Dawn of the Dead*, the remake of George A. Romero's horror classic. First-time director Zach Snyder doesn't let up with the brutal gore, taking the zombie death squads into another mall setting like the original, where a small group of survivors continues their fight for escape. Some make it. A lot don't, getting blasted, impaled, eaten, mutilated—anything to get a good cringe. The film lacks the social undercurrents that made the original *Dawn of the Dead* far meatier, but it sure does connect the adrenaline with slick, sudden jolts of action and skillful doses of suspense; give it up for the ferocity of the attacks—the zombies now move crazy fast. The jokes come as expected, but there's actually enough entertaining banter moving the simple fight for survival tautly forward. For once, a decent horror film shocks with its scares, not its frighteningly dumb dialogue. *Dawn of the Dead* will slip from your thoughts the moment you turn it off, but it sure does deliver the cheap horror goods.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B Extras: NA

KILLZONE

War is hell in Dreamwave's adaptation of Sony's upcoming FPS

Killzone, Sony's highly anticipated first-person shooter, arrives on PlayStation 2 this November, and with it, a three-issue comic book miniseries from Dreamwave Productions. Written by John Ney Rieber (G.I. Joe: Reloaded) and penciled by Travel Foreman (Dr. Spectrum), with fan-favorite artist Pat Lee lending his talents to the chase cover, the Killzone comic provides a prologue to the game, which combines a futuristic world with 20th century weapons and scenarios as humanity faces the threat of the Helghast invaders on the world of Vecta.

Reversing the situation of many licensed comic books, Sony came to Dreamwave and proposed that they transform the Guerilla-developed title into comic form. "It turns out some of the guys at Guerilla are huge fans of Dreamwave," notes project manager Graham Cruz, explaining how they got the call. "When Dan Taylor from SCEE (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe) got a hold of our Transformers/G.I. Joe series, with John Ney Rieber and Jae Lee, they figured we'd be the ideal choice to do a comic book adaptation. ...When we saw the trailer for the game we knew we had to do it. We have no doubt

At the San Diego Comic-Con 2004, Dreamwave displayed this PS2 adorned with a custom Killzone art job by Pat Lee.

that this game will raise the bar as far as squad-based first-person shooters go, and we hope our comic series will do the same."

Standing in the bullet-riddled spotlight of the Killzone comic will be Interplanetary Strategic Alliance (ISA) Sergeant Rico Velasques, one of the four playable characters from the game—the team's heavy weapon specialist and so-called wild cannon.

"The narrative begins in the ISA trenches, as the soldiers of Rico's squad brace themselves for the first blitzkrieg wave of the Helghast invasion, and ends just before Rico's appearance in the game—alone and on fire with rage," says Rieber. "In the game, it's clear that Rico hates the Helghast so savagely that he's walking the edge of insanity—and the team's leader, Templar, knows it. After you've read the comic, you'll understand why. And you'll probably feel the same way about the 'Ghasts that Rico does."

To help them recreate the game in comic book form, Sony provided extensive background materials for the Dreamwave crew and also let them pull double duty by acting as testers for the game. The result is that the comic will very much have the same look and feel as the product on which it's based.

"Working with Guerilla and Sony has been great," Rieber comments. "They gave me everything I needed to put myself—and Rico—where we needed to be. Rico is very much distilled from the portrayal—well, the presence—of the character in the game. The core setting of the comic story and a lot of the core elements of its action are based on the synopsis of an unproduced short film that Guerilla put together. The ISA and Helghast weapons and uniforms—even their tactics, to some extent—are *very* based on the game. ...Which is not to say that the game's developers have given me a set of cookie cutters,

and I'm stamping away with them. Guerilla has actually incorporated at least one element of this [comic book] story into the backstory of the game. It's a minor thing. But the fact that the studio would do that says a lot about the team."

Despite having most elements of the Killzone universe already in place, Rieber says that he hasn't felt restricted at all in creating the savage, gritty tale he wants to tell—in fact, it's the most creative freedom he's had in years. "I've been obsessed with war, and writing war stories and not much else, for the past few years," he admits. "But there've always been constraints—limits on the nature of the stories. Things my soldiers couldn't say that I wanted them to say. Things I couldn't show that I wanted to show, to actually say something about war. And here, I can do that. In fact, it's what Dreamwave and Guerilla and Sony *want* me to do."

In particular, Killzone provided the opportunity to depict war with an accurate, ugly reality, a modern-day authenticity via the incorporation of 20th century weapons and strategies into the action. This isn't about futuristic fighting with energy shields and plasma weapons—this is brutality, plain and simple. "I'm not interested in injecting an overriding fantasy component into a story of war. What I want to do is know and feel, as starkly and truly as I can, what it feels like to be a soldier... In some ways, Killzone is almost like a historical primer of 20th century warfare—from the trenches of World War I on. The vision of war it presents is not sanitized. The grime and blood and jagged edges that history shows us are inescapable parts of war, and they are all there. ...It's realistic. It's scary. There's truth in it. I love it."

Despite the realistic warfare and basis in military authenticity, Killzone is still nonetheless a game, so perhaps

the most important aspect of Rieber's creative philosophy is to impart that same type of kill-or-be-killed intensity of an FPS into the comic book.

"I try and remember the simple thing," Rieber explains. "When you play a first-person shooter, you're inside the character, and behind the gun—and your life is on the line every second, every frame. An adaptation of a first-person shooter should put you in the same place. Sans cheat codes." **Chris Hoffman**

> "What I want to do is know and feel, as starkly and truly as I can, what it feels like to be a soldier..."
>
> *John Ney Rieber, writer, Killzone*

Capcom brings the fight to the Living Room

So maybe tabletop pen-and-paper RPGs aren't exactly the epitome of cool...but that may soon change with the introduction of Capcom World Tournament. Created by Living Room games and based on Open Gaming License d20, CWT takes players into the Capcom universe—Street Fighter (all versions), Darkstalkers, Rival Schools and Final Fight to be exact—and lets them experience the dynamic action in a whole new way starting later this year.

Using a deep system of rules and stats that recreate their favorite Capcom characters' abilities and fighting moves (or, alternately, users can make a new character from scratch), as well as the requisite multi-sided die, players will be able to journey through an adventure of their choosing (either with pre-existing scenarios or user-created ones) or simply engage in one-on-one combat that is the heart of Capcom fighting games. This simplified mode, known as Showdown Combat, will let players get right into the game for bouts that can be completed in 10-30 minutes, while in the full-fledged role-playing mode, one participant will act as Referee (the equivalent of a D&D dungeonmaster) to guide the other players through the adventure.

"What the characters do is completely up to the players and the Referee," says Living Room Games president Joe Chan.

"They could decide to do nothing but go through a long series of fights in a tournament arena, or they can engage in more involved adventures that require them to work together to overcome sinister plots, defuse world-wide threats, or defeat the Red Team in the next school-wide athletics meet. The game and the world are both flexible enough to allow for any style of play."

The first book of this ambitious project—simply titled Capcom World Tournament and scheduled for release this December—will act as an introduction to the game universe and provide the core ruleset, as well as give players a taste of the characters and events the Capcom world has to offer. The four sourcebooks that follow, each containing extensive character, special move, scenario and world data for their specific games, in addition to new fighting styles, will be released quarterly throughout 2005: the Street Fighter Encyclopedia, Darkstalkers' Grimoire, Rival Schools Yearbook and (Final Fight's) Welcome to Metro City. Each volume should retail for $30 or less. Furthermore, the timelines contained throughout the volumes will attempt to tie these divergent threads of the Capcom universe into a cohesive whole—with Capcom's approval, of course.

In many ways, tabletop RPGs helped pave the way for video gaming as we know it; in a few months, video games will help create the next big thing in tabletop RPGs. **Chris Hoffman**

Oh yeah, she screams video games.

..Snuck in.

Nick's dad! (Michael Des Barres)

Morgan Webb

BT (left) and Tommy Tallarico (right).

Photos Michael Tran

G-Phoria: Gaming's night out...way out

This year's G-Phoria may have looked like an old David Lee Roth video, but they had their moments. And although the mental scars from seeing Anna Nicole Smith in a Vanessa Z. Schneider outfit may never fully heal, many a deserving developer got their props, BT and Tommy T. closed the show in style, and the world got yet another whiff of gaming's ongoing surge.

Let's have a little fun and see how our 2003 awards compared with TV land's...

Alternative Sports Award
They say: Tony Hawk's Underground (Activision)
We say: Downhill Domination (Sony)

Best Adaptation
They say: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)
We say: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Electronic Arts)

Best Cinematic
They say: Final Fantasy X-2 (Square Enix)
We say: Ditto!

Best Easter Egg
They say: True Crime: Streets of L.A. – Snoop Dogg Cheat (special missions) (Activision)
We say: Who cares?

Best Graphics
They say: Ninja Gaiden (Tecmo)
We say: ...It came out in 2004 (foul) so the winner is Jak II (Sony)

Best Handheld Game
They say: Final Fantasy Tactics Advance (Nintendo)
We say: Wrong again—Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow (Konami)

Best Innovation
They say: Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow (Multi-player mode) (Ubisoft)
We say: Paint smoking on this one; EyeToy all the way

(Sony)

Best Mobile Phone Game
They say: Bejeweled Multiplayer (JAMDAT)
We say: Please hang up and try again...

Best Multiplayer Game
They say: Unreal Tournament 2004 (Atari)
We say: Final Fantasy XI Online (Square Enix)

Best New Franchise
They say: Viewtiful Joe (Capcom)
We say: Ditto

Best Racing Game
They say: Need for Speed Underground (Electronic Arts)
We say: Ridge Racer Evolution (Namco)

Best RPG
They say: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)
We say: Final Fantasy X-2 (Square Enix)

Best Sound Design
They say: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (Electronic Arts)
We say: Primal (Sony)

Best Soundtrack
They say: Tony Hawk's Underground (Activision)
We say: Castlevania: Lament of Innocence smashes it to little bits (Konami)

Best Traditional Sports Game

They say: Madden NFL 2004 (Electronic Arts)
We say: Ditto!

Best Voice Performance – Female
They say: Enter the Matrix – Jada Pinkett-Smith (likeness) (Atari)
We say: Not even close: Hudson Leick as Jen in Primal (Sony)

Best Voice Performance – Male
They say: James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing – Pierce Brosnan (likeness) (Electronic Arts)
We say: Andreas Katsulas as Scree in Primal (Sony)

Favorite Character
They say: Ninja Gaiden – Ryu Hayabusa (Temco)
We say: Foul again! Viewtiful Joe wins (Capcom)

Game of the Year
They say: Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)
We say: The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (Nintendo)

Hottest Character
They say: Final Fantasy X-2 – Rikku (Square Enix USA)
We say: Vanessa Z. Schneider from P.N. 03 (but we see their point, so call this one a draw)

Out of 20 categories, we agree a whopping three times, tie once and don't care twice. Now that's progress!

Alpine Interface Adaptor for iPod (KCA-420i)

www.alpine-usa.com **Price: $100**

Here's a familiar scenario: you hop in your car, iPod in hand, and you're ready to jam to some tunes while driving up the coast. The only problem is that there really isn't a good way to connect your iPod to your car stereo. Sure you can use a cassette adaptor or even an FM modulator, but, quite honestly, the sound quality isn't the greatest. Enter Alpine and their KCA-420i. For only $100, you will be able to connect your iPod to any existing Alpine Ai-Net in-dash head unit and get full functionality of your iPod. What's cool is that the iPod will get full benefit of Alpine's exclusive Bass Engine technology to improve the sounds of the MP3 files. What makes the unit even cooler is that users will be able to view song information—including artist, album, song name, etc.—on the display of the head unit. Our favorite feature is the MediaXpander technology. Since compressed digital media is known to lose some detail in the sound, the MediaXpander technology improves the sound quality tenfold. And with Ai-Net head units priced as low as $200, there really isn't a reason not to upgrade your car stereo now, is there?

Portable digital audio

Creative Zen Touch

www.creative.com **Price: $269.99**

Sporting a cool casing and an innovative scrolling method is the latest portable audio device from the folks at Creative. Instead of using a scroll wheel, the Zen Touch uses a specially designed touchpad that allows users to rapidly scroll upwards or downwards through their music library. We found using an up/down motion was a lot easier on our thumbs than a circular motion; the scroll speed can even be controlled dependant on where you place your thumb. In addition to the touch-sensitive pad, the Zen Touch also boasts a 24-hour battery life (12 hours longer than the new iPods). Other features include a 20GB HD, which can hold up to 10,000 WMA files and 5,000 MP3 songs, USB 2.0 transfer, customizable playlists, a 4-band graphic equalizer and free AudioSync software to seamlessly update your Zen Touch with your PC's music library.

Customized PC Interface

Doom 3 Zboard

www.zboard.com **Price: $19.99**

Before you go venturing off killing Hellknights and Lost Souls, be sure you have the Doom 3 Zboard on your PC. The Zboard is truly the ultimate gaming keyboard. For those of you who've vowed never to use a keyboard and mouse in games, this may convert you. On the surface it may look like an ordinary PC keyboard, but players are able to change and remove custom keysets for specific games. Take the official Doom 3 keyset, for example. After a few minutes playing around with the controls and getting your fingers used to the layout, playing through Doom 3 with the Zboard improved my gameplay quite a bit. No more fiddling with mouse wheels or function keys—every major function in Doom 3 was within a finger's reach. The two USB ports on the keyboard are also a nice touch. Sure, it may look geeky, but it's definitely worth checking out.

No game will ever be the same once you've gone wireless.

Performance you can trust

375